NAMDEO DHASAL
POET OF THE UNDERWORLD

Poems 1972–2006

selected, introduced and translated from the Marathi by

DILIP CHITRE

with photographs by

HENNING STEGMÜLLER

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The cover shows Namdeo Dhasal in his village Pur-Kanersar which he visited in 2004 after winning the Sahitya Akademi's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Photograph: Henning Stegmüller

Cover and book design: S. Anand

Namdeo Dhasal founded Dalit Panther, the militant organisation modelled on Black Panther, in 1972. The same year he published *Golpitha*, a poetry collection that became a landmark in Marathi literature. He has since published eight collections of poems. In 2004, the Sahitya Akademi bestowed on Dhasal the only Lifetime Achievement Award it gave during its golden jubilee celebrations. Dhasal lives in Mumbai.

Dilip Chitre is a bilingual poet, translator, essayist, fiction-writer, playwright, screenplaywright, filmmaker and painter. His film *Godam* won the Prix Special du Jury in Nantes in 1984. In 1994, he won both the Sahitya Akademi Award (for *Ekoon Kavita–1*) and the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize (for *Says Tuka*). He lives in Pune, Maharashtra.

Henning Stegmüller is a still photographer, cinematographer and filmmaker. Among his documentaries are *Vari: An Indian Pilgrimage* and *King Khandoba's Hunting Expedition*—both in collaboration with eminent Indologist, the late Professor Gunther Sontheimer. In 1994, he made *Bombay: Geliebte Moloch*, a one-hour film on the city that he jointly scripted and directed with Dilip Chitre. Namdeo Dhasal is a key figure in the film. Stegmüller lives in Munich, Germany.

Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld
Poems 1972–2006

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© Translations, Introduction, Notes: Dilip Chitre
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Poetry of the Scum of the Earth

Dilip Chitre

The word dalit is used in Marathi to mask the stigma inherent in the word *asprushya*. This is done in deference to political correctness; for asprushya means untouchable – and that category of human beings regarded as loathsome by caste Hindus in India does not legally and constitutionally exist in the Indian republic.

In practice, however, untouchables not only do exist in India in large and significant numbers, but they also continue to be loathed and hated as much, if not more, than ever before. Crimes against stigmatised communities are a regular feature of Indian life; and among the stigmatised, the dalits are a prime target.

One of the new reasons for hating dalits since India became independent in 1947, and a democratic republic since 1950, is the political power they acquired in a nation that elects its government through universal adult franchise. Dalit votes can cause decisive swings in electoral politics and caste leaders are not only aware of this but also base their political stance and manipulations on the dalit factor.

Greed for power corrupts a society and dehumanises civilisation, as has been evident throughout human history. India's history since it became a new nation state in 1947 adds a revealing chapter to this law. India's first law minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet was the Maharashtrian dalit scholar, social reformist and political leader of national stature – Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was born in the mahar caste, an asprushya or an untouchable in the Hindu caste system. However, Ambedkar's father was employed by the British Indian army and as such was better off than his fellow asprushya civilians. Ambedkar was a prodigiously gifted student and thanks to help from the princely ruler of Baroda, Maharaja Sayajirao III, he was able to pursue higher studies at

Columbia University and the London School of Economics, in addition to being called to the Bar. At that time, few caste Hindu Indians had achieved comparable academic distinction in the west.

Ambedkar was a prolific writer both in his native Marathi and his acquired English. As his asprushya stigma was directly a legacy of the Hindu caste system, Ambedkar devoted most of his intellectual energy to removing the stigma inflicted by the Hindu scriptures.

One of the architects of the Constitution of India as a member of its founding body, the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar was engaged in fierce debates with the predominantly Hindu congregation of India's founding fathers. Even as India's law minister, he was often ranged against the majority of his colleagues. He resigned from the post.

He founded the Republican Party of India with a determination to preserve the pluralist vision of the Indian state and to create an organised alternative to caste Hindu political domination. Just before his death in 1956, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism en masse with his followers to quit 'the Hindu fold' that would not remove the stigma of untouchability. The Buddhism he embraced was his own radical and modern sociocultural ideology – atheist, rationalist and secular – and clearly a political weapon.

Since Ambedkar's death in 1956, the movement for the liberation of the dalits that he launched and led has died a slow death too. In Maharashtra that was his natural social and political base, kinship and status hierarchies have splintered the dalits into their numerous constituent communities. Ambedkar's own community – the mahars – tried to wrest and inherit his mantle.

Corrupted by the temptations of electoral politics, the many factions of the Republican Party have been wooed by bigger national parties or have floated new dalit parties and alliances. Activism has given way to political compromise and promises of a share in the power to rule. Dalit politics are in a shambles.

2

Like his idol and icon Ambedkar, Namdeo Dhasal was born a mahar, an

untouchable, in 1949 when the Constitution of India was being finalised and ratified. However, there the similarity between the two dalit luminaries ends.

The odds against which Namdeo fought his way to the centre of Marathi literature and culture make a very different yet as compelling a story as Ambedkar's lifelong battle to win back human dignity and to wrest equality for his community downgraded by the Hindu scriptures.

No Marathi literary historiography written so far gives due credit to the numerous regional and communal oral traditions that have shaped the base and the ethos of the Marathi tradition. When written Marathi poetry emerged by the end of the thirteenth century in the form of the bhakti movement, it broke loose from the dual hegemony of the vedic and post-vedic scriptural and the late Sanskrit classic literature canons. It was a paradigm reversal that turned the peripheral into the central; and it empowered women and the oppressed castes to create literature from the orature rooted in their non-Sanskrit native tongue and its dialects. A right they have not given up since.

With its affinity for the spoken word, poetry (other than theatre) is the one literary genre that conveys subtle tones of intimacy and powerful thrusts of urgency even in its textual incarnation. It is here that Indian poetry distinctly breaks away from its post-Gutenbergian western counterpart. With the currently corrupted categories and academic confusion created thereby, we can only perceive this. In its elemental form, poetry is located in the human voice. Even when it is appropriated and re-voiced as a performed text, it does not cease to have a live addressor and a live addressee. It remains a loquation.

Namdeo Dhasal restored this quintessential quality of live performance to his extremely complex poetry from the outset. His very first collection of poems, *Golpitha* (1972), is written in an idiolect fashioned in the streets of the red light district of central Mumbai, and from the mahar dialect spoken in the Maval region of the Pune district in Maharashtra—his native tongue.

In Mumbai, Namdeo's language had a generous infusion from Bambaiya Hindi or Bombay Hindi—the city's lingua franca. However, the Kamatipura neighbourhood in which Golpitha is a landmark has Muslims speaking Urdu,

labourers from Andhra speaking Telugu, prostitutes imported from Karnataka and Nepal—a unique ethnolinguistic cocktail. Namdeo does not shy from making this his poetic register and identity. He is clear that he would meet literature on his own terms and his brash confidences sometimes spill over from his intensely charged poems.

3

Golpitha can be read in many ways. It can be read as a sequence of interrelated poems, or even as a journey poem that takes us simultaneously through a specific location and the mind of its spokesperson.

The boundaries of *Golpitha* are not just verbal, however. Marathi playwright and writer Vijay Tendulkar wrote a foreword to the first edition of *Golpitha* and was struck by its rootedness in space and time, and by the language that defied penetration beyond a point. He was also one of the first to recognise that he was perhaps confronting a poetic genius and his powerful masterpiece, the like of which Tendulkar had never before encountered.

Tendulkar writes,

> The world of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry – the world known as 'Golpitha' in the city of Mumbai – begins where the frontier of Mumbai's white-collar world ends and a no-man's land opens up. This is a world where the night is reversed into the day, where stomachs are empty or half-empty, of desperation against death, of the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages, of diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighbourhood tough guys and pimps…

Tendulkar's eloquent exasperation describes evocatively what anyone with a bourgeois literary sensibility from a world separated from its own conjunct underworld would experience. In the beginning of the twenty-first century Mumbai is one of the world's mega-cities and its underworld is what global

civilisation would shove beneath the carpet because it cannot be removed by any of the ideologies the world still professes.

4

Namdeo's genius, from the outset, grasps that the stigma of untouchability originates in the loathing of the lowliest human beings by those that have systematically downgraded them and have created traditions that would continue to oppress them. Loathing the other human being that is not one of us is the opposite of the love and compassion that prophets and spiritual leaders of humanity have preached repeatedly. Loathing is an extreme and contemptuous form of hatred of the stigmatised—'the other' whom one should not even touch, the untouchable.

As the central symbol of the stigmatised and the loathed, Namdeo uses the female prostitute of Golpitha, an object of carnal 'love' but still 'loathed'. Unlike a wife, the prostitute has no institutionalised sanctity. She is, therefore, denied dignity as a human being. Her status is that of the ultimate untouchable—serving other humans by allowing them to degrade oneself.

5

Classical Sanskrit aesthetic theory proposes that there are nine kinds of *rasas* or emotive stimuli that any literary work of art plays with. They evoke emotive states (rasas) such as the erotic, the heroic, the tragic-compassionate, the marvellous, the comic, the terrible, the repulsive, the awesome and the serene. Among the nine, the *bibhatsa rasa* is the one that produces repulsive or nauseous feelings. In western terms, scatological literature may be called something that produces the bibhatsa rasa—the feeling of nausea or revulsion. This is rarely used in elite literature though scatology has its literary artists from Rabelais to James Joyce and Henry Miller

The quotation from Tendulkar's foreword to the first edition of *Golpitha* tries to articulate the 'white-collar' response to Dhasal's world. Tendulkar forgets that he is a *touchable* and Namdeo is an *untouchable*, and that *Namdeo's universe is untouchable, too.* It is a loathsome and nauseating universe. A journey into it is a journey from the sacred into the profane. Or, if we were to see it in purely secular and material terms,

it is a journey from the clean to the dirty, from the sanitised to the unsanitary, from the healthy to the diseased.

The graphic imagery of Dhasal's poems often zooms on the contents of sewers and stagnant pools of water that even in their verbalised and therefore somewhat distanced form hit us both by way of sight and smell. Our senses are besieged, as it were, by almost palpable filth and stink—part of the image of the 'loathsome' untouchable in the perception of the chaste and touchable caste Hindu. Through his powerful poetry, Namdeo seemed to be launching from the very start - single-handedly - a guerrilla war against the effete middle-class and sanitised world of his literary readers, among them many professors of literature, critics and ideologues of the left.

To return briefly to classical aesthetics, and especially to Sanskrit poetics, in Namdeo's multilayered image of the real world, the underlying layer is the world of the untouchable and its nauseating details of degraded humanity. This is the primary layer that foregrounds the rest and it is used for exposing the various overlays of the touchable, pleasing, beautiful, refined world that cannot obliterate its width and depth. The bibhatsa rasa is the dominant feeling and resonance (actually a dissonance) that Namdeo juxtaposes with shringara, adbhuta, roudra, karuna, hasya and shanta.

Thus Namdeo pits a nauseous feeling against a combination of the sensuous–erotic, the marvellous or the astounding, the furious or the angry–heroic, the tragic–compassionate, the comic and the serene feelings on which most touchable literature dwells. It is his way of confronting readers, critics and other poets as a lumpen and as a dalit. He will either succeed and change them, or fail and be their victim once again.

It seems to me that Namdeo is a great poet because he understands that great poetry integrates - rather than divides - humanity, becoming the anguished expression of the human condition in its own space and time. Its specifics do not obscure its universal appeal. To be poetry, it invents its own language but stays connected with every other language, dialect and idiolect of poetry as though selecting and embracing its own community; and this is what makes it, despite difficulties, open to translation—acceptance by the other.

As a practising poet and a reader of my contemporary Marathi poets, I was dazzled by *Golpitha*. More than three decades later, when I wrote an introduction to the book, I said that it would be a contender for as high an award as the Nobel prize for literature. I know this is highly unlikely to happen because it is far easier to see the filth from which Namdeo rises tall and alone – high enough to make the label 'dalit' redundant and facetious – than to grasp his innovative singularity as a poet.

6

In 1972, other than publishing *Golpitha*, Namdeo Dhasal founded Dalit Panther – a militant activist dalit organisation – with three other dalit youths, J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle and Raja Dhale. The purpose of Dalit Panther was to bring young dalit men and women together and organise continuous action and protest against the oppression of dalits in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India.

In the 1970s, as even now, atrocious crimes were committed against dalits across India; and they included rape, murder, arson, looting and destruction of property, and organised attacks on dalit neighbourhoods and ghettoes by caste Hindus. The government was not very sensitive to these acts of atrocity. Casteism, like racism, was deep rooted in the caste Hindu psyche. Often the dalit was at the other end of the stick when complaints were made.

The police had a small number of dalits in the constabulary and an even smaller number among higher ranks. However, they were a minority and the very fact that they were dalit rankled as far as the caste Hindu majority was concerned. Dalit Panther acquired notoriety in police records as regular troublemakers.

Namdeo and his fellow protestors were often arrested for disturbing the peace and were mercilessly beaten in police custody, when they were caught. They had little or no legal aid. False reports in the police records branded Namdeo as a naxalite – an activist of the Marxist insurgent movement in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal that the state and the union governments are still unable to control or neutralise. By 1975, the Maharashtra police had about three hundred and sixty chargesheets filed against Dalit Panther all over the state and Namdeo Dhasal, who evaded arrest, was on their 'wanted' list.

The then prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, proclaimed a national Emergency in the country and suspended the Constitution. India became virtually a police state. Recognising the implications of this for Dalit Panther and him, Namdeo went to Delhi, sought a meeting with Mrs Gandhi – who gave him a patient hearing – and talked about atrocities committed against dalits. Mrs Gandhi ordered the Maharashtra government to drop all charges against members of Dalit Panther and their leader, Namdeo Dhasal.

7

Were Namdeo Dhasal and the Dalit Panther sold out to the establishment when he shook hands with Indira Gandhi, the prime minister who proclaimed Emergency to rule the country with an iron hand? As it became apparent later, there was no hidden deal in this. In 1977, Mrs Gandhi lifted the Emergency against all advice, sought a mandate from the people of India, and lost.

The dalits of Maharashtra were once again scattered pawns on the larger political chessboard. Politics in India underwent a major upheaval. A motley opposition alliance of all Mrs Gandhi's opponents during the Emergency, barring the communists, won a thumping victory and wrested a huge majority against her Congress party in Parliament and several states.

Like everybody else in politics, Dalit Panther had to take stock of the shifting foundations of Indian politics and reinvent their identity. As a rule, Dalit Panther stayed away from direct participation in party politics. Dalit Panther supported any credible party that showed commitment to justice for dalits.

By now, larger political parties had lured many former Panthers; and lacklustre leadership and unprincipled partnerships had eroded the Republican Party's thin base further. Some of Namdeo's former lieutenants even got ministerships in the Maharashtra cabinet or other profitable offices.

8

Infighting among aspiring dalit leaders of Maharashtra – especially those who traded in block dalit votes to election nominees of other political parties – resulted

in attempts to assassinate Namdeo Dhasal. Though he escaped these attempts miraculously, they have figured in his medical history since.

One of these was a conspiracy to execute Namdeo while he attended a large gathering of dalits in Nagpur in 1974. As Namdeo could not get his fare to travel there, he did not reach the dalit shantytown where he was to stay. However, his potential assassins did not know this. Namdeo's lawyer-friend and partner on this trip, Sunil Dighe, was mistaken for Namdeo and the assailants chopped one of his legs in the nocturnal attack. A rumour that Namdeo was murdered spread and reached Mumbai. Namdeo's mother heard the rumour and went into a shock. She was never completely sane after the trauma.

The most grievous injuries that Namdeo suffered were in Nashik in 1975, when about two hundred Congress party workers surrounded him and beat him till he became unconscious and was given up for dead. He was brought to Mumbai with broken ribs and punctured lungs, and was bedridden for two months. This was a time when the Congress, the Shiv Sena and the Republican Party were all in collusion and regarded Dalit Panther as their prime enemy, and the Dalit Panther's moving spirit Namdeo Dhasal was their prime target.

9

Namdeo took ill in December 1980 and was diagnosed in January 1981 as suffering from myasthenia gravis, a disorder of acquired immunological abnormality characterised by impaired neuromuscular transmission. There is no permanent cure for this condition. The patient is maintained on a lifelong regimen of corticosteroids. Other than being irreversible, myasthenia gravis is an expensive disorder to handle, and the cumulative side effects of steroid therapy are unavoidable.

Nevertheless, Namdeo is a born activist and Dalit Panther his raison d'etre, as much as poetry is the life of his spirit. Namdeo cannot separate his activism from his poetry, and his poetry is only the literary form of his activism.

During his post-myasthenia period – that would be twenty-six years till the time of writing – Namdeo has largely supported himself by writing newspaper

columns and with financial assistance from his many friends across party lines.

With his nine collections of poetry, two short novels, three volumes of essays and a large number of uncollected articles, short fiction and memoirs, Namdeo Dhasal's presence in contemporary Marathi literature is very much alive. Despite the handicap imposed by his unpredictable disorder that may bring on a sudden muscular collapse any time, he still draws large audiences—whether at Dalit Panther meetings or in literary gatherings and cultural meetings. He is a scintillating speaker as well as a formidable demagogue.

10

The purpose of this long essay is not singular. It has evolved over a long period of time and I would not want to pretend that above anything else it is the result of my bonding with a fellow contemporary poet who is an extraordinary human being.

I can go as far back as my first encounter with Namdeo in the late 1960s when he was a young taxi driver in Mumbai who wrote cutting-edge, avant-garde Marathi poetry in an unusual idiom. Since then, our friendship has continued because of my interest in poetry as well as my interest in the dalit cause after the tragic departure of Ambedkar from the national scene in 1956. Over the years, I have been the only person in whom Namdeo has confided and to whom Namdeo has revealed in rich detail his life since early childhood.

Nevertheless, the present book as a project owes much to the involvement of a third and most unlikely friend, Henning Stegmüller of Munich, Germany. Henning and I had a common close friend and colleague in the brilliant German Indologist Dr Gunther D. Sontheimer. Maharashtra and its nomadic pastoral tribes in particular were the area of Sontheimer's lifelong field research. After he died suddenly in Germany in 1992, Henning brought part of his ashes to India to be immersed in the river Karha near the pilgrim town of Jejuri—the focus of much of Sontheimer's research for three decades.

After the 'second' funeral of Sontheimer in India, both Henning and I were feeling the great void left by our departed friend. We felt empty and dejected. Perceiving Henning's loneliness as he planned to return to Mumbai from Pune to

catch his flight back to Germany, my wife Viju and I decided to travel with him in a taxi to Mumbai.

During the ride to Mumbai, Henning talked sadly about how he had lost the friend who had introduced his India to him and how he would now have to find India on his own. He had been reading V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and asked me if I had read it. I answered by citing how Naipaul, with all his stylistic eloquence and superficial accuracy of reportage, relied on incompetent informants, and I cited the chapter describing Naipaul's encounter with Namdeo Dhasal. "Let's visit Namdeo," I suggested, "You meet him and take a look at him while Naipaul's description is still fresh in your mind."

Henning was excited by the idea. His reporting time at the airport was a little before midnight and we had a few hours in Mumbai on our hands anyway. Scarcely did either of us know then that we were walking into a collaborative project, involving Namdeo as well, that would keep us occupied for the next decade of our lives.

11

Henning Stegmüller is a still photographer, cinematographer and filmmaker. He has excelled in making films in that special genre that is sometimes called ethnographic documentary. In his work, the human ethos and the details of the image get preference over formal and pictorial considerations. They are images of life expressing itself in the most difficult, surprising, absurd, dramatic, tragic, comic, self-contradictory, or in any other way meaningful conditions.

Henning, Viju and I entered Namdeo's ground floor house at Sat Rasta in central Mumbai around four in the afternoon. Henning of course knows no Marathi and Namdeo and his wife Malika cannot speak English. Therefore, Viju and I had to do a lot of spontaneous translation. But they hit it off surprisingly well.

Both Namdeo and Henning are spontaneously warm, and this quality of personality nearly always transcends the barriers of culture, class and language. Henning was not asking too many questions. He was busy clicking his still camera and I had known this aspect of him since we had worked together before.

Namdeo was seated bare-chested and shirtless in his cane swing chair, with just a *lungi* wrapped around his waist, and his wife Malika was moving in and out of the kitchen, confused and excited by our unexpected visit with a foreigner. Their son Ashutosh was silently but keenly observing us. Malika's friend Aruna Raje, a Hindi filmmaker, happened to be visiting her. All this created certain chaos though everybody seemed to be enjoying it.

While we all had dinner, Namdeo asked me if my friend Henning would like to see his area. By his area, unless otherwise specified, he always meant the red light neighbourhoods around Kamatipura. We then went on a guided tour of Kamatipura just when the evening lights were being turned on and the gaudily made up, scantily dressed prostitutes were displaying themselves in the windows and doors of their dwellings known simply as 'the cages' in local slang.

Namdeo had launched the Association of Loathed Women – Tiraskrut Nari Sanghatana – for civil empowerment of sex workers harassed by extortionists, gangsters and the police alike. As their leader, he was warmly greeted by them. Shopkeepers, teashop owners, street food vendors also greeted him, and all the while Henning's eyes stayed locked to his viewfinder as he shot roll after roll of film.

As the taxi we hired for the evening took Viju and me to the Mumbai international airport with Henning, we were already discussing a book on Mumbai with photographs by Henning and poems by Namdeo and me. This would give Henning his own India to occupy in the absence of our friend, Gunther Sontheimer. The improbable figure of Namdeo Dhasal – Dalit Panther leader and poet of Mumbai's underworld – became the cornerstone of our next project together.

12

The book we collaborated on was published by A1-Verlag, a small but distinctive press in Munich, Germany, under the title *BOMBAY/MUMBAI: Bilder einer Mega-Stadt*, which can be roughly translated as *BOMBAY/MUMBAI: Images of a Mega-City*.

The introduction to the book is a discussion Henning, Namdeo and I recorded

on the future of Mumbai and its teeming population. The book contains ten poems each by Namdeo and me, translated by Lothar Lutze with some help from me; and one hundred black and white images of people, landmarks and events in the life of the city by Henning Stegmüller. This was the first time Namdeo's work was appearing in a European language other than English and Henning's stunning photographs of what we referred to as 'the gastrointestinal tract of Mumbai' provided the best ambience for Namdeo's work.

A one-hour documentary feature film followed this book. Henning Stegmüller made it for ZDF (Second German Television) and I was his co-director and scriptwriter. This film was called *Bombay: Geliebte Moloch* or *Bombay: Beloved Moloch.* One of the most absorbing sequences in this film is our journey through the red light area of central Mumbai with Namdeo as our guide, and a live documentation of Namdeo addressing the Republican Party's reunion rally at Shivaji Park, Mumbai, attended by over half a million people. The film ends with Namdeo answering the question, "What does dalit mean?" bringing our film full circle to the least visible of Mumbai's people—its lumpen, of which the poor dalit are a significant part.

As independent filmmakers working on our own initiative, Henning and I are now working on an exclusive film on the journey of Namdeo's life from the tiny hamlet of Pur-Kanersar in rural Pune district to becoming the recipient of the only Lifetime Achievement Award to be given by India's national academy of letters – the Sahitya Akademi – at its golden jubilee in 2004. This is a triumph of dalit creativity. It has enormous significance for the nascent dalit renaissance in India.

13

Namdeo Dhasal still describes himself as one of the lumpenproletariat—scum of the earth. This was the term that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used 160 years ago to make their historical analysis of class comprehensive. They gave nearly sixty different definitions of the term that included chronically unemployed people outside the pale of the organised working class: prostitutes, beggars, casually employed labourers etc. We still use the term lumpen to denote those who have no assets and only intermittent incomes—the economic destitute or people who do 'unproductive labour' as Marx and Engels apparently thought.

To us the lumpen people are an uneducated, unenlightened lot; the scavengers we see living off the leftovers of consumer society in cities like Mumbai. To Namdeo, the word dalit and the word lumpen are often indistinguishable. His definition of dalit embraces all people discarded by society as useless to its organisation. This takes the term dalit beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of the Indian Constitution. It means socioeconomically ostracised people, and India has hundreds of million of them. Though dalit incomes have risen marginally and now there is a fringe dalit middle class, the largest numbers of these communities will still be among India's 300 million 'scum of the earth'.

14

Hordes of uprooted and incomeless humans from all over rural India are being driven increasingly to urban and urbanising areas in search of a sustainable struggle for life. Namdeo's profound understanding of the second-class citizens of Mumbai comes from his own immigrant roots and his living contact with the urban underclass as a whole.

Henning, Viju and I travelled with Namdeo to Pur-Kanersar in 2005. This was Namdeo's first visit to his native village after receiving the Sahitya Akademi honour at the hands of the prime minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh. Namdeo's award was a media event. Even the people in his village had noticed it and were proud of it. They wanted to give Namdeo a big welcome while we wanted to record on film Namdeo's memories of his childhood and some of his poems.

15

Pur-Kanersar has a picturesque setting. It is surrounded by mountains and hills and consists of flat tableland and slopes. There is even a small natural lake near it. It is only when you look at the people and their dwellings that their daily struggle for life is revealed to you.

Namdeo's was a hero's return to his native place. Pur-Kanersar's poor inhabitants gave him a hero's welcome. As Namdeo's friends, Henning, Viju and I were treated as special guests. By his achievement and due to his status as a national

celebrity, Namdeo had crossed the caste barrier. The few older villagers Namdeo knew since his childhood reminisced about the village, as it was fifty years ago when Lakshman Dhasal migrated to Mumbai with his wife Salubai and son Namdeo.

When we came to the small river flowing through the two villages, Namdeo stopped to explain to us how the up-river portion was reserved for the privileged castes to draw water and how the untouchable oppressed castes were allowed to use only the down-river part. He also showed us the large well that seemed like a small fortified structure in which the privileged castes could bathe and swim as well as draw water from. He reminisced about an incident in his life when he and some other untouchable children sneaked up to the well, swam in it, were found out, chased, and beaten up for 'polluting' the water. I remembered the leitmotif of water in Namdeo's poems that is always the border between the castes—the brahmin on its sacred side and the rest on its profane side. The use of 'pure' water was a caste privilege. It divided humanity absolutely by scriptural decree.

The dalit were branded by the circumstance of their birth. They bore a lifelong stigma that alienated them from the privileges to which civilised society was born. They were to be treated as the permanently uncivilised. I recalled Ambedkar's pronouncement before he converted to Buddhism with his followers—that he did not wish to die in the inequitable Hindu society in which it was his misfortune to be born. The anguish of Ambedkar becomes an eloquent cry in Namdeo Dhasal's poems. It reminds the reader who a dalit is and what it means to be a dalit, how it feels to be a dalit, and of that born-superior glare of disgust and rejection in caste Hindu eyes as they look down at a dalit.

16

Namdeo was the only child of his parents and he was born after Lakshman Dhasal, his superstitious father, made several vows and promises to the Hindu god Shiva in a temple on a nearby hill. Namdeo's mother Salubai was Lakshman Dhasal's second wife. His first wife had eloped.

In a stunning short novel neglected by Marathi critics and readers, Namdeo

recreates the village of his childhood and how a mahar woman whose husband has gone away to Mumbai to earn wages brings up a child. The novel's title *Hadki Hadvala* refers to the barren land outside a village that is traditionally granted to mahars for performing certain functions in the village.

For a while, Namdeo was sent to his aunt's house in Pune for his early schooling. Around the year 1955, Namdeo and his mother Salubai left Pur-Kanersar for good to join Lakshman Dhasal in Mumbai. Lakshman Dhasal lived in Dhor Chawl, a squalid and congested row of tenements that has scarcely changed in the last half century. Henning, Viju and I recorded Namdeo's visit there and saw for ourselves how deeply involved Namdeo is with the lives of his former neighbours and how he remains in touch with his origins and identity.

The room in which the Dhasals lived still has no electricity. Several families are packed in that dingy cell of a room that has a door as its only source of light and ventilation. We filmed Namdeo reminiscing about life in Dhor Chawl and we did not have to stretch our imagination to visualise life there. It was still there just as Namdeo described it.

Dhor Chawl has a mixed Muslim and dalit population and their lives are intertwined as a single community. Namdeo's father worked as an assistant in a beef shop owned by a Muslim butcher. He was paid daily wages and given his share of the leftover scraps of meat as a bonus. Namdeo's mother cooked the scraps in a large pot as the family's main dish.

It must be explained here that though some caste Hindus are vegetarian and all of them regard the cow as a sacred animal, dalits eat meat and they commonly eat beef. Some Hindu castes eat the meat of goats, and fish and fowl. However, eating beef is considered an act of profanity inviting dire religious consequences. Since dalits are not allowed to enter the arena of the sacred in any case, their eating beef is of no religious consequence.

17

The stigmatised dalit is profane in the eyes of the caste Hindu who lives on the sacred side of life. This is an absolute cultural rift. The brahminical rules of

touchability are strict and rigid. They separate the sacred world of the brahmin from the profane world of all the rest, Hindu or non-Hindu, flexibly graded according to contingency.

Some forms of labour are in the realm of the profane – garbage, sewage and excrement disposal, for example – and they become the function and responsibility of the untouchable, because these substances themselves are untouchable. Among the dalit there are further subdivisions according to the kind of labour assigned to each sub-community.

The dalits practice a hierarchy among themselves. Ambedkar was a mahar, and though he spoke for all dalits many mahars who claim to be his followers believe that the mahar comprise the elite among the dalit. This is one of the many reasons why after Ambedkar's death his followers remain splintered and fragmented though there are, of course, other reasons.

Namdeo's essays and critical writings, influenced as much by Marx and Engels as by Ambedkar and Lohia among Indian thinkers, go to a comprehensive concept of dalit and the mascot he chooses to represent the downgraded and the permanently stigmatised among humankind is the female of the species. Among females, again, the prostitute becomes Namdeo's ultimate symbol of human degradation—an object of exploitation through sexual possession, and an otherwise loathed non-person, left to living decay after use.

18

Namdeo's personal experience of stigmatisation reaches deep into his childhood in his native village and keeps accumulating through his years of growing up in Mumbai, dividing the world into 'ours' and 'theirs'—a world broken apart in an absolute sense. His poetry divides its audience into 'us' and 'you' at times; however, more often than not, it rises above the rift and views human life with dispassionate compassion, almost forgiving life its flaws and faults.

It is the nimble and graceful movement across the fault lines of alienation that give his poetry its artistic distinctiveness. At times, a surge of cleansing fury rages in his writing. At other times, it is moistened by sensitive compassion and a spiritual

clarity. Namdeo's is a rooted and located human voice that demands to be heard on its own terms. He uses words that do not exist in the vocabulary of the other or have different connotations for aliens.

At best, his translators (including myself) can achieve translucent analogues of texts that are luminous and transparent at source, precise in detail and exquisitely located. One recognises it as a living idiom at its performing best. It can be felt even before it is understood or recontextualised.

19

While schooling in Mumbai, Namdeo was marked as a very good student with a special flair for language. In a long interview with fellow-poets Satish Kalsekar and Pradnya Lokhande (from which extracts are included in this book), Namdeo mentions how he memorised most of the poems that his Marathi teacher gave him to read and how he was able to grasp their style and prosody. In the same interview he stresses how, in his childhood, he was exposed to Marathi folk theatre – the tamasha – as many of his near relatives were performing artists.

Namdeo reminds us that the rich oral and aural traditions of the non-brahmin folk are separated from the textualixed traditions of the brahmin and other privileged castes, just as the sacred and the profane are divided in Hindu caste society. Tamasha is a robust and earthy form of theatre and it considers life as essentially a matter of fun. Other than *vag* – a form of dramatised and farcical storytelling – tamasha has dance, music and song as its vital components. The *lavani*, as the song in this form of folk theatre is known, is erotic and bawdy, often revelling in double entendres accessible to its rustic audience, but sometimes rising to the level of brilliant erotic and sensuous poetry. Most literary and theatre critics keep oral traditions out of their discourse as though knowingly or unknowingly following the traditional sacred–profane fault line dividing caste culture from its non-caste contemporary.

Namdeo's literary roots draw as much nourishment from oral and aural folk sources as they do from his acquaintance with modern poetry and art from the world over. Though his formal education stopped at high school, Namdeo is a self-

taught person with an astonishingly wide range of reading and amazing acumen. He is a rare specimen of the poetic culture that would be necessary for any poet to scale great heights in a comparative global landscape.

20

"The Tree of Violence" (1975) is a long poem that draws its rhetorical energy from folk sources that are unusual to literary ears trained solely on poetic texts rather than voiced poetry. Hopefully, even in translation the poem retains its quality and creates its own audience. It was published in the collection *Moorkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavile* (The Stupid Old Man Moved Mountains).

"The Tree of Violence" was written in a period of historic turmoil for India, in the same year in which, later, Indira Gandhi proclaimed Emergency in the wake of a mass movement against bad governance launched by the veteran Gandhian socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan. The poem uses the persona of a folk storyteller to capture one of the turning points in India's recent history and to create a magic realist fable, exploding then into the poet's own vision of total revolution. His poem pointedly ignores the dominant castes and the upper class, and focuses on the dalit or the lumpen as Namdeo loves to describe the entire underclass in India.

This was a new sound in Marathi and Indian poetry using folk imagination and folk poetics to create an artistic form of immense sweep and power – the poem is like the pictorial organisation of a massive mural with its vivid imagery and it has the musical architecture of a breathtaking concerto. Today it can be pointed out as one of the classics of modern Indian poetry.

21

As a translator of Namdeo's poetry since the late 1960s, when I first came across it, I had to prepare myself in many ways and that involved a lot of unlearning and relearning of literary habits and reflexes and linguistic knowledge.

I seemed to grasp his poem as a whole, yet many of its seemingly vital details

would slip out of my fingers when my translator's hand tried to render them in English. However, despite its inadequacy in facing the source text, a target text creates a stylistic analogue that has to stand or fall on its own; and this is my stance as a translator. As a Marathi poet and a member of the larger literary community in my bilingual world, I was almost compelled to draw the attention of readers of English poetry to the phenomenon of Namdeo Dhasal.

What were the difficulties?

At first, they seemed simply lexical problems of finding one-word or one-phrase equivalents for unusual source text words and phrases. However, the language Namdeo used was his own idiolect and that idiolect drew its lexicon from several different dialects layering his work, much like a painter lays one transparent layer upon another.

Within the surface or the literal layer of a typical Namdeo poem, there are obstacles of another kind. Proper nouns in many poems denote places and persons some of whom are not easily identifiable to even native Marathi readers. They are located in personal experience, history, mythology and folklore, not just of Maharashtra or India.

Then there are the ecological and the territorial markers: common names of the plants, birds and beasts of his native district. There are object-names starting from such objects as the stone mills and grindstones to the names of kitchen utensils; names of implements, instruments and tools used by villagers in his part of Maharashtra; nouns connected with cookery and cuisine; and nouns referring to animal and human anatomy.

The vocabulary of the central Mumbai underworld, centred in and around Kamatipura, is a fusion of many languages—predominantly Marathi, Urdu, Telugu and Kannada. It is the mixed vocabulary of prostitutes and pimps, petty criminals, gangsters, drug peddlers, small traders, craftsmen. These are all immigrants settled in the lower depths of the city's population and they bring with them trails and traces of their distant native regions. They are a mixture of many communities of diverse religious persuasions and ethnic origins.

In his poetry, Namdeo does not adopt a standard register or even one

consistent register implying an addressee audience. Most of his poems are self-addressed and therefore only accessible in parts, passages and flashes. His poems are driven by the voice of the poet initiating a rhythmic movement, creating sweeps, swirls and loops through syntactical inversions and convolutions, forceful strokes contrasting with fine-lined details. The reader is drawn into its music and dazzled by occasional phrases and images, innovative turns of phrase and striking metaphor.

His poems defy linear denouement and literal translation because at the heart of his creative process are Namdeo's technique of free association and the spontaneous contextual leaps he makes. He forces his translator to take similar risks. I have had to omit or abandon translations of some of his major Marathi poems that either do not cohere as a whole in the source text, or yield a target text that would be incoherent to the Anglophone reader. My aim is to present reasonable English poems based on excellent Marathi originals.

These poems are aimed at a literary reader who has little or no knowledge of the source language. They are not meant for social scientists, ideologues and activists. They are not designed to raise or answer linguistic questions. Their best audience, I hope, will be found among those who accept translated poetry because they need to read it for cognitive as well as aesthetic reasons. Their worst audience would be among those who believe that poetry cannot be translated. Without abandoning that kind of rigid philosophical position, no one can venture into translation.

I have not attempted to transfer the verbal surface of a source text to my target language. I have had to negotiate every step of my hazardous journey towards a target text through complex mediations; I have had to deal with obscurities and ambiguities, difficulties and stumbling blocks. This is enjoyable in the end only when a translation can achieve a semblance of the resonance, the intensity, the power, the luminosity and the occasional transparency of the source text.

Ethnography cannot solve its empirical and residual problems through semiotic structuring and restructuring alone. Namdeo's existential location is where his poetry comes from; and it is obvious that his translator's location cannot

be the same. The translator is committed to a comparative stylistic relocation of his source text to arrive at his target language text. In that process, he alone knows what he loses in translation and what he adds in translation to give his effort overall coherence. The best part of poetry is in its irreducible residue; but it is equally worthwhile to recover in translation the rest of it, lest poetry itself should go wholly unnoticed.

22

One of Namdeo's poems from *Golpitha*, "Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage", is a case in point. One stanza of the poem is simply a partial replication of learning the Urdu alphabet by rote. As in Arun Kolatkar's then unpublished poem on the Marathi-Devanagari alphabet, the poetic purpose of invoking letters and words starting from them is to bring out the whole surreal, absurd and self-consciously paradoxical business of constructing a poem out of a given language grid.

In reworking my 1975 translation for the present book, I have chosen to keep the Urdu letters and words as they are, unlike in my previous version. It does not take away much from the marvellous transitions of sound and register in the source text; the translation tries to draw attention to a quality of the original and underlines its own existence of being a translation.

23

Golpitha belongs to that long international tradition in modern urban poetry beginning with Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* published in 1857. In this same tradition falls Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* written two decades later. I wrote and published essays on seven modern western poets in Marathi in the late 1960s, including essays on Baudelaire and Rimbaud, with Marathi translations of some of their poems. Namdeo certainly read them and it opened his eyes to possibilities of poetry untapped by Marathi poets.

Seeing one's existence as a journey through hell began in Europe with Dante Alighieri *Divina Commedia* and its scenes may have been inspired by life in medieval

Italian cities. Bohemian life in nineteenth century Paris and London revealed to Baudelaire and Rimbaud a whole mythopoetic resource. Namdeo Dhasal, who lived in the filthy but fecund underworld of mid-twentieth century Mumbai, may have conceived *Golpitha* through a similar feat of genius. The remarkable unity of *Golpitha* – in time, space and consistency of imagery, tone and themes – leaves one in no doubt that as a complete poetic statement it is a landmark in contemporary world poetry.

24

Namdeo's poetry has continued to evolve since 1972 until the very present and it has found a late lyricism and a mature tone foregrounded by all the earlier work's existential angst and anarchist-revolutionary vision. He is not just the foremost among Marathi dalit poets. He is arguably the foremost Marathi poet, one of the foremost poets of India, and a poet of world stature. This book presents the quintessential Namdeo Dhasal as I have tried to understand him over the last four decades and I own all the sins of omission and commission in the process.

This book presents the least complex and the relatively shorter among Namdeo's poems selected from his eight collections of poetry published since 1972, excluding the book *Priyadarshini* (1976) which is one long poem. My final criterion was their suitability for translation into English without any annotation and gloss as far as possible.

The source text and the target text of any translated poem is a highly contested area where metatextual readings differ. As a translator, I would always accept the blame for error, whatever its margin. However, the main purpose of this effort is to present the human being that informs these poems and informs us that we are equally human in sharing them. I have therefore, in addition to writing this extended essay, included excerpts from a long interview with Namdeo.

25

This book would not have been possible without the spontaneous and intuitive support of Henning Stegmüller and his wife Marie Van de Loo. But for Henning's

gentle yet persistent prodding, ever since I introduced him to Namdeo in 1992, this book would have been delayed indefinitely. His insightful photographic images of Namdeo in his own world convey what words cannot. My wife Viju has assisted me in translating, compiling and critically reviewing the final text. I read all my translations, right up to their final version, to Viju—as has been my practice for more than fifty years since we started our relationship.

Finally, S. Anand of Navayana must be thanked for his enthusiasm and patience in bringing out the book delayed by the indifferent health of both Namdeo and me during its critical last phase. We all have unflinching faith in both dalit enlightenment and an Indian renaissance led by Navayana. We also share the belief that major poetry can change its reader's awareness of life and is thus a vital agent of cultural change.

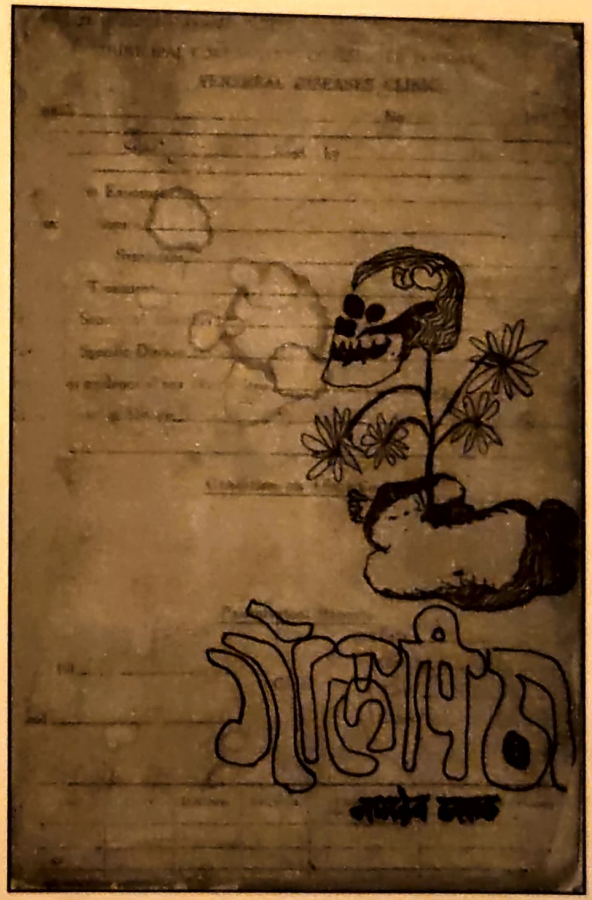
One of Namdeo's recent poems is an elegy on the death of my son Ashay – a painter, photographer and actor – who had promised one of his paintings to Namdeo as a cover for his forthcoming book. The poem is too personal and I avoided translating it. In lieu of that, I chose to dedicate this work to the memory of Ashay. The world we shared with Ashay – Namdeo, Henning, Viju and I – is rooted in a shared anguish and a glimmer of hope for humanity.

Poems
1972–2006

Namdeo Dhasal

from

Golpitha (1972)



The cover design and illustrations for the June 1972 first edition of *Golpitha*, priced at Rs 4, were done by Namdeo Dhasal himself. The cover and some of the illustrations are reproduced here. The backdrop for the cover is a form of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay's Venereal Diseases Clinic.

Man, You Should Explode

Man, you should explode
Yourself to bits to start with
Jive to a savage drum beat
Smoke hash, smoke ganja
Chew opium, bite *lalpari*
Guzzle country booze—if too broke,
Down a pint of the cheapest *dalda*
Stay tipsy day and night, stay tight round the clock
Cuss at one and all; swear by his mom's twat, his sister's cunt
Abuse him, slap him in the cheek, and pummel him…
Man, you should keep handy a Rampuri knife
A dagger, an axe, a sword, an iron rod, a hockey stick, a bamboo
You should carry acid bulbs and such things on you
You should be ready to carve out anybody's innards without batting an eyelid
Commit murders and kill the sleeping ones
Turn humans into slaves; whip their arses with a lash
Cook your beans on their bleeding backsides
Rob your next-door neighbours, bust banks
Fuck the mothers of moneylenders and the stinking rich
Cut the throat of your own kith and kin by conning them; poison them, jinx them
You should hump anyone's mother or sister anywhere you can
Engage your dick with every missy you can find, call nobody too old to be screwed
Call nobody too young, nobody too green to shag, lay them one and all
Perform gang rapes on stage in the public
Make whorehouses grow: live on a pimp's cut: cut the women's noses, tits

Make them ride naked on a donkey through the streets to shame them
Man, one should dig up roads, yank off bridges
One should topple down streetlights
Smash up police stations and railway stations
One should hurl grenades; one should drop hydrogen bombs to raze
Literary societies, schools, colleges, hospitals, airports
One should open the manholes of sewers and throw into them
Plato, Einstein, Archimedes, Socrates,
Marx, Ashoka, Hitler, Camus, Sartre, Kafka,
Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Ezra Pound, Hopkins, Goethe,
Dostoevsky, Mayakovsky, Maxim Gorky,
Edison, Madison, Kalidasa, Tukaram, Vyasa, Shakespeare, Jnaneshvar
And keep them rotting there with all their words
One should hang to death the descendents of Jesus, the Paighamber, the Buddha and Vishnu
One should crumble up temples, churches, mosques, sculptures, museums
One should blow with cannonballs all priests
And inscribe epigraphs with cloth soaked in their blood
Man, one should tear off all the pages of all the sacred books in the world
And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses when done
Remove sticks from anybody's fence and go in there to shit and piss, and muck it up
Menstruate there, cough out phlegm, sneeze out goo
Choose what offends one's sense of odour to wind up the show
Raise hell all over the place from up to down and in between
Man, you should drink human blood, eat spit roast human flesh, melt human fat and drink it
Smash the bones of your critics' shanks on hard stone blocks to get their marrow
Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars
One should become totally savage, ferocious, and primitive
One should become devil-may-care and create anarchy

Launch a campaign for not growing food, kill people all and sundry by starving them to death
Kill oneself too, let disease thrive, make all trees leafless
Take care that no bird ever sings, man, one should plan to die groaning and screaming in pain
Let all this grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up
And burst at a nameless time to shrink
After this all those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others their slaves
After this they should stop calling one another names—white or black, brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra;
Stop creating political parties, stop building property, stop committing
The crime of not recognising one's kin, not recognising one's mother or sister
One should regard the sky as one's grandpa, the earth as one's grandma
And coddled by them everybody should bask in mutual love
Man, one should act so bright as to make the Sun and the Moon seem pale
One should share each morsel of food with everyone else, one should compose a hymn
To humanity itself, man, man should sing only the song of man.

Ode to Dr Ambedkar

My ropes are pulled towards you, you who conceived of giving a burial
To the cages of religion, caste, gender and race preserved under armed protection;
My ropes are pulled towards your achievement
Through a low-toned falling rain's softly played flute
Tunnelling out of my soul, surrounding electric trees
Kicking that ancient woman hard and deep in the butt.
Mirrors are losing their reflective polish;
The sea of hell is being parted;
The powdered bones of those afflicted with sin are being scattered from high above in the sky
And they vanish; the sun is setting over the lands ruled by demons—
The devils who plucked the leaves of mythology from a blossoming spring;
The devils who made my throat sing songs that condemned all regions of evil.

The skin of the untouchable parched by cycles of untouched life is moistened by your Heavenly stream;
You've smashed the head of the god-given wind
That created room for a wobbly nation and its restless people;
You've pierced through the voluptuous thighs of those ghostly nymphs that cast
Their spell upon us. My history starts from you, the age of everyman you launched.
Let those who want to have the history of man bundled and sacked in abstract and concrete
Stigmata the blind masses wear on their forehead; the caste-mark of false history.
People are tempted to dynamite themselves to blow up their latent greatness.
I won't look for you among the bulls and the bears of the market, or in the clock of the present Time.
I won't seek you in the distance between the crow and the factory, the public urinal and the prison custody.
The shining liver of a seven-year-old gathers rust.
O teak tree shaking in all these circumstances,

I pursue the waves of change on the crest of my period;
I'm thinking of the wild birds and the city birds shitting on your bronze statue.
That's no thought really; it's only a parasite that's growing
On a circumambulation of your statue,
That's the origin of the individual, and a shortening of the long journey towards one's identity
That contains neither a flame nor a knife,
That has the hardness of the back of a female crocodile and the insensitiveness
Of the skin of a rhino;
That contains only the burbling sound of the original spring of life and the tenacity of an iguana;
And bodies built like fortresses and bastions.
Thought and death are both deception;
Smoking a hashish pipe and getting laid are both deception—
As though a sheet bought from the goddess of rags can cover absolute nudity.
The parrot of existence perennially pecks at the unending agony of thought;
The parrot of existence perennially pecks at the permanent pain of death.
Death is that stone inscription of which the thinker is always afraid.
Death:
Thought:
The hashish pipe:
Sexual intercourse:
It's a sovereign precious stone that even time cannot cut with its teeth.
I can't see my own face, you know;
It's a nauseating face; and that I, with such a face, should be an animal wagging its tail
Following *them;* you've pushed me towards such a crucial doorstep.
An earthen owl of compassion and a black rose of blood grow out of my arse;
Their fermented foul breath commands me to vomit,
And makes me walk through a crowd;
And trees walk with me like humans;

And my hands compose books of the apocalypse;
The procession that covers me up has no root in death;
It's a procession for which a fire-pit blazes in my mind
And white rabbits swing in the air;
It's the formation of a single luminous clan that the seasons have planned;
That procession and I were never split apart.
Time does not categorise the same sex: for the eyes of time are never
As myopic as the vision of the censors;
If time were myopic, how would your face
At the bottom of this procession, and at the bottom of my being, be hurt
By those divine whales imagined differently in parliaments of the people?

As my head becomes visible, rising above hurts and tortures,
Shrieking military aircraft circle above me searching for their prey
And the design of a martial law regime starts erasing
Lines drawn on maps; and the whole web of lines;
And through this crisis, I am going on my tenacious journey
Like a would-be conqueror, driven by a desire shaped like the Ashwamedha charger;
In this pomegranate forest I am going through, my society is just a bystander;
If I don't uproot this society of mere onlookers,
A hard rock will separate you and me: and I will not be able to see
Your radiant disc surrounded by lotuses growing among crystals, rejecting all material things,
And merged with myself, tasting wholesome and scrumptious like freshly baked millet bread;
A textile mill, a hut;
An asthmatic, a soldier;
One goes through the length of the settlement to the courtyard of childhood
To play with shaggy red-haired puppies,
And to inhale mango-blossoms that burst before raw mangoes appear on the tree;

And to catch and slay the frightening anti-shadows,
Their hordes prancing like deer, and shimmering like bony plates on the skin.
I am afraid I'll go berserk,
Fifteen years after you were gone.
Death has just fed dust to one of your comrades,
And buried him in a grave measuring his seventy-one years;
And once again the same gloom has fallen that spread when you passed away;
Newspapers repeated the same headlines they had used for you:
'Champion of the Dalits Gone
Creating a Void in the Dalit Community'
Do leaders in a movement wear the same shirt?
And have the same ink and letters used about them, and their feet and their shoes?
They – who never make the error of going
One step forward or backward from the pioneer –
Don't posses the fuel and the velocity with which are born
The ones who have the spunk to lift their foot as high as their leader did
Or to move it differently.
He who digs his own grave in the presence of his mentor,
And eagerly embraces decreed concessions,
And rides high horses for the sake of a chair that has no successor,
He who does not change the flavour of the day or the night,
Or the saliva on the tongue, or the water in the saliva;
He who loses touch with life in the soil, and creates the black and white
Monsters of factionalism,
For such a one I cannot shed one heart-felt tear.
I don't squeeze for him the oil in my body, nor light candles for him;
And I don't wear my best mourning black to attend an obituary meeting.
On the Throne that people gave you, since occupied by only grief and spontaneous lament,

I smell only your fragrance;
And the extinguished pupils of my eyes itch as the skin of cripples does.
I follow your teachings: struggle relentlessly, challenge the foundation of faith, of pledges;
And I carve myself up to the last particle of poverty and agony in me.
And I plunge a sharpened shovel into my own heart too;
And soak the pages of your life with warm blood;
And arouse the only honest thing in me;
And I move into the battle amidst gunfire and explosions and tanks;
And through lush green blades of wheat;
For, at the very point of the needle, one is introduced to love and to the green blade of wheat;
And with the robust surging energy of uncontrollable bulls,
The wife dreams the husband's dreams, and the dreams of the wife are dreamt by the child;
And thus happiness forms its chain of life to forge a future.
Everyone is, as a matter of fact, as complete as the Sun
That protects and preserves all; including the cactus;
And uses the dew that forms on petals
To heal all pain;
That Sun recognises the difference between man and beast;
That Sun grows weary of the sameness of day and night;
That Sun crosses over all things;
That Sun finds the colour of life and death as useless as that of a sweet lime
Its beak turns into brass, and pecks at the diseased skin of age;
That Sun flows perennially through shouts of victory,
And is found moving in the smile of a flower.
It refuses to serve the village community, rejects the millet-bread offered as its mahar gatekeeper;
It cannot sprout in the muck of rum and coke;
It does not sit on doormats as untouchables do.
That Sun flies like the New Year's butterfly and spreads light;

That Sun grows parallel to railway tracks;
That Sun loosens the stone walls of universities;
It moves only from one freedom to the next.
You are that Sun, our only charioteer,
Who descends into us from a vision of sovereign victory,
And accompanies us in fields, in crowds, in processions, and in struggles;
And saves us from being exploited.
You are that Sun
You are that one—who belongs to us.

Water

When water is brought to despair
A desperate life-or-death struggle reaches its critical point
And the folk-song withers away,
"Our ram is hopping and prancing, falling back to rush headlong
—Hai lavri chin!"
The tree in sight starts eating its own fruit, licking its tongue
Disease comes to the body that desires it
The point being an excuse
A fart shakes the pipal tree
The worm-like awareness of being, sitting smug inside the belly, becomes furious
How could one then ignore
A whorl in the water that gives birth to its ugly progeny
Out of the velvety canal
Comes the shape of the castor wood system of draw-well and bucket
The lively and talkative water is gagged and bundled up
Head touches the thatched wall feet touch the roof-beam
A swarm of terrorised midges starts hovering
Millet meal rises on the horizon filling it with sprouts
The harbinger of luck in the oudumber tree is in agony
The fingers of thirst get peeled off as they hull beans
And man begs compassion of his own barren body
An earth-mouthed bowl widens its jaws
How your secular regimes turn into toadies
Upstream, the water is all for you to take
Downstream, the water is for us to get

Bravo! Bravo! How even water is taught the caste system
Your servile laws still reluctant to be pulled out from a statute of 1881
The snout of the devotee of your goddess touches us with sterile affection
Remember, shit does not altogether disappear in water
Nor does unparalleled slaughter vanish
There may be many vultures on your side ready to go on a rampage
No sooner than a blind one's hand accidentally falls on the cunt
But the surviving ones who are mammals don't care
For your patched-up quilt and refuse to accept it
And they preserve the purity of their nights
Whatever vessels you keep them in, they won't gather rust;
Howsoever they are used and worn; they don't need to be polished.
They aren't deceived by your network of humanitarian canals
They aren't awed by your rabbi and kharif crops
They collect your rottenness in their cupped bowls
They raise hell to shame you
They forget their minority clans to arrive at a common level
When they do this, just how many villages will you be able to ostracise
With your foul noses
The heart of water is generous and reaches the very roots
Its healing touch makes the scabs of a thousand sorrows fall off
What walls, how many walls, can you build around water
How will you shackle the rushing form of water
Water has endless stations
Water doesn't need to toll bells to announce itself
Water doesn't become as ruthless as to make a donkey weep
The gates of water are so absolutely open they prove the cosmic spirit an illusion
Water flows ahead of virtue and sin

Those who dare water are dragged by their third leg straight to the bottom of hell
The high and the mighty ought to avoid playing games with water
The 1117 murders that informed the Perumal Commission give water its sense of identity
Water has the heat of the arson in Kilavenmani
Water has the pugnacity of thousands of crumpled blouses
Don't you dare to take on water
Don't you look for its origin, caste, or genealogy
Water is like Siddhartha
Water is like the Ashoka tree
Water is also nitric acid

"Water, water,
Speak water, what colour are you
Son, it's like your eyes.
Water, water,
Tell me water, what your colour is–
Daughter, it is the colour of your thirst".

Hang your robes of majority power to dry on your thorny fences
And make way for water
O Lady give me some water, give me some water O Lady
Pour me a trickle, O Lady
My throat is parched.
O Big Brother, O village Patil,
O Master, O God My Lord,
Ouch Ouch O
A bamboo up your arse, you asshole,
I'll smack you with my butt

Away, away, you daughterfucker,
You fistfucker, you shithead, you jerk,
You pedigreed bastard,
Get away, get away, you block in the way of water.
'You get out of here. Don't make my blood boil.
I'll shred you to pieces; I'll set the whole world on fire
Out, out.'

The river reserves its birthright over man
Wherever we may set foot, you will be jeered for draining out water from your fields,
And thereafter, nobody including us will remain thirsty
And nobody will neutralise the potency of water any more
Your only God, who colours water with caste, will begin to suffer from an awesome diarrhoea
And then, just to keep the loose ends of your *dhotars* moist
You will start begging for water
We shall give you large containers filled with water

O torturers
There is no duty in this world more graceful than giving a gift of water
When there is a shortage of water
You change your city as you would change your shirt
Tell us, then,
What should they change
Who thirst and die without water?

Their Orthodox Pity

Their orthodox pity is no taller than a Falkland Road pimp
It's true, they haven't raised any ceremonial tent for us in the sky
After all, they are the feudal lords; they've locked all light in their vault
In this lowered life imposed on us, not even a pavement belongs to us
They've made us so helpless; being human's become nauseating to us
We can't find even dust to fill up our scorched bowels
The rising day of justice, like a bribed person, favours only them
While we are being slaughtered, not even a sigh for us escapes their generous hands

Fountain Sprinkling Light

Ruined darkness, fountain sprinkling light
In sprinkling light she's pregnant and drenched
What pressure is this?
Will I shatter inside myself?
Like glass?
Who is pushing me into a python's belly?
I'm pulled in like a cold, senseless stiff
Into myself.
She is staring at me with wide-open eyes
As though she were someone else.
My thrill is ending
I'm stunned from tip to toe…

Ruined light, fountain sprinkling darkness
In sprinkling darkness I die without a scream

Approaching the Organised Harem of the Octopus

We are approaching the organised harem of the octopus
I am the seal bearing the image of the bull dated March '65
My properties are Mohenjodaro
I am the one who drew the head on the lion pillar
My ornamental daily weather
Radiates from the feet
From hand-to-hand I release my catacombs
Go scatter curds milk butter in the courtyard
Organised harems of the octopus are approaching us

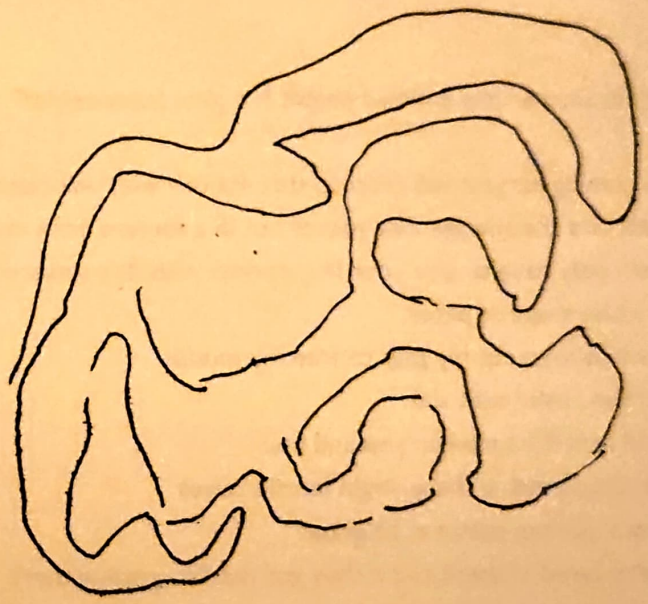
Frightening grotesque people eating
Starvation underlined in decimals
In the womb of 1970
Menstruating broad
The capable hand in bed holds a partisan inferno
Bhang in the intestines
Those who are wearing gum-boots may raise their hands
Organised harems of the octopus are approaching us
After she conceives the female eats up the male
1234567890 are all numbers on the trees
We have to absorb the slowness of a day in our own momentum
Place a weathered face in the flesh market
Pluck it out of the flesh market
There is a four and a zero before us
The zero can generate four scattering away in four dimensions

If a zero is placed after four it becomes forty
If a zero is placed under four it gets a strong foundation
Four–zero accompany us when we say *'Inquilaab Zindabaad!'*
We plant *'the Banner of Blood'*
Those who were gloomy while frisking four and zero
Remained forever the slaves of slaves
After she conceives the female eats up the male
Go scatter curds milk butter in the courtyard
Organised harems of the octopus are approaching us.

By the Side of The Crucifix

We finished our screwing by the side of The Crucifix;
Or, we poured out torrential sweat carrying heavy containers of water.
Candles struggling to survive died on our feet;
In no time they spread all over the town.
On the black orphan island we carried on our head
The just risen crescent-moon-ornament lies prone and breathes
Hurt all over the body like a prostitute.
Next to us is the empty Home-guards Maidan present like an enemy ready to thwart us.
Mile after mewing mile wanders the cat of the night
We're all over the streets spread out long and wide as tar on the road

Allahu Akbar



Sparrows of darkness clustered on the eyes are flying away
I see the legs of homeless urchins in the graveyard
Let's filter out the Shia and the Sunni dargahs inside ourselves
Let's weep upon every grave
Allahu Akbar

Who has Sheared and Enclosed People in a Glass Paperweight?

"Who has sheared and enclosed people in a glass paperweight?"

In the coming harvest will crop up that eunuch who will castrate
The shit and the sewage that gushes out in a torrent from my face
You will only have to give your fingerprints with dirt-smeared hands
On a white sheet of paper
You will have to cut my gags to free my mouth
Sure, I can cover with soil
The old hostility between you and me.
But do stop sending these virgin female calves
Into your puritan pastures to graze:
If they're lured in there and if they got used to grazing there
That would be the most tragic day in your life and mine.

I agree that my formidable organ is
Rotten and festering;
You may keep it in your art galleries;
You may keep my innards hung
On bayonets, if you wish;
I will witness to my heart's content, the
Primordial Sun collapse in the end, crying

"Who has sheared and enclosed people in a glass paperweight?"

On the Way to the Dargah

A leaking sun
Went burning out
Into the night's embrace
When I was born
On a pavement
In crumpled rags—
And became orphaned—
The one who gave birth to me
Went to our father in heaven
She was tired of the harassing ghosts in the streets
She wanted to wash off the darkness in her sari
And I grew up
Like a human with his fuse blown up
On the shit in the street
Saying, *'Give five paisa,*
Take five curses'
On the way to the dargah.

Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage

On a barren blue canvas
Her clothes ripped off, her thigh blasted open,
A sixteen-year-old girl surrendering herself to pain.
And a pig: it's snout full of blood.

The face that seems attractive is not really a face:
Behind it lies the bitter reality of a skull, the ordinary truth.
When someone's flesh is ripped out
To what terminal do the parts of the skeleton lead you?
In the backyard of love, all you find is fruits of fear and disgust.
An infinite and sovereign nothingness stalks us all.
People whom we regard as our own are mere heaps of dust or smoke.
Alif is for anar
Be is for bandar
Pe is for pankha
Te is for talwar
Te is for tattoo
Se is for samar

So is the worship of the geographic contours of man
And of the romance of arse-fucking

Manda
Your mind is neither of ash nor of marble
I feel your hair, your clothes, your nails, your breasts

as though they were my own: they reveal to me, within myself
colonies of the dead; hunchbacks left to die in the streets;
Sandwiches; streets; milk of a she-dog that's just given birth to her litter;
They do not let me reach up to you; up to your lips; up to your eyes.
Until now, you and I were unrelated to each other.
And there were no calls to each other burrowing holes in us.
This period is as long as ten miles; as close as ten seconds;
And in its aria
You: Me: Seeds: A splinter of glass nibbling us;
And a thousand states of being.
Never before had I seen a face so devoid of light
As was yours; and of a thousand other females like you.
Flashing out from so many countries, and so many cages;
And bearing so many different names.
Now I've developed a taste for a withered tree; as well as its dried-up bark.

I've been dazzled by your worn-down and lacklustre face.
From that lacklustre look you descend into me, and own me.
You make anguish scream inside me; and stream inside me; and appropriate me.
Is that the scream of an ending; or is the end itself a scream beginning?
The end is a scream; an unregretted event;
An amended Constitution; and its pretence of reform;
People stunned by darkness; themselves turn into darkness.
Sparrows come out of darkness, flying, and then they drop dead.
Their wings grow enormous; and put a World War to shame.
From the imagination,
From the reality,
From the law,
From the waterfall,
From the tree,
From the shadows:
I see the light within you, storming, and grinding the grain.
Grief is mentioned; and grief walks towards the grave.
The beloved is only a sanctified form of a whore;
The lover is just a glorified pimp.
Women are merely printed whores of men.
Men are just pimps of women.
The relationship of men and women is just like—
Take a few whores; take a few pimps; take a few chewing sticks to clean the teeth;
And throw them away after use; and then gargle with the holy water of the river.

Manda,
My peahen,
Look out of the window, and a new world is born.

Embraces, skin-deep love:
A whirlpool of illusion, that's spellbinding all the same;
That's not a whirlpool but mere silt; and it's just a salve to wounds.
Cut off the legs of an ant with an axe;
It will crawl till it collides with the end.
And after that—flesh, shit, hair won't mean a thing.
The air in their movement cuts foetuses.
Isn't what you gave to one man, and what took from him, enough for you?
You hallucinate that darkness is a tree, the sky, a sea, a flower, a bed:
Hallucination cheats; and leads to the grave.
That old Madam who keeps you caged, she's known to people as Destiny.
She seizes a beast and turns it to dust.
People who eat her up and survive, defy death, and lead what's life.
Now I see the furniture in the café dancing;
Chairs-tables-glasses-waiters-customers-bread-cashier-butter.
Deep in a lukewarm silence,
You sit crouched;

Looking at the luminosity
In the glass and in the cat's eyes;
Delving into the green waves with your hands.
Instead of extracting minerals from the surface, recovering compassion from it.
That which grows scales isn't really a surface;
Flames refuse to look at scales;
Only ash stares at them; and sneezes, and continues to live.
People who are merely involved in living are actually dead,
And gone cold.
They fall in love and get into a tangle of body and mind.
Your eyes are flames; and your touch sparks a revolution;
You are sandalwood; and you're the healing bark of the babhul tree;
You are the sword, and the blood dripping from the neck;
You are the living lightning, and you're the water in the bones.
Touch the animate and the inanimate
With your dry-moist fingers;
And then see: how the magic in your lustreless existence works.
Just the touch of a finger
Will turn the stone
Into platinum;
And you will forget
Your untimely
Slaughter.

On a barren blue canvas,
Clothes ripped off, a thigh blasted open,
A sixteen-year-old girl surrendering herself to pain.
And a pig: its snout full of blood.

from

Moorkha Mhatarayane Dongar Halavile (1975)

(The Stupid Old Man Moved Mountains)

A Seasonal Poem from the Police Custody

There are four thousand and five hundred types of cacti:
Among the cacti there are different castes, races, cultures, styles;
Some cacti are soft like a peacock's feather—
One feels like slicing one's heart open and folding them in;
Some of them, however, are a million-thorned world:
Even if one didn't touch them, they would prick one's mind.
They wound the soul:
Then, there's a continuous stream of blood,
The whole Earth is drenched in it three times over.
The jailer and the cactus:
The cactus and the jailer.
I'm moved by their mutual resemblance.
I've often seen jailers becoming criminal-minded in the company of their prisoners.
They become so sterile, that in no season a tender shoot would sprout in their heart.
Now, you'll say this so-called poet is comparing
Our Senior Jailor with a cactus.
So I tell you, listen guys, it's not that simple.
I'm a prisoner and a poet who goes to the heart of the matter.
To understand events and characters, how would I simply juxtapose
Your officer and a cactus?
Your prison official is as innocent as a child
Whose heart has remained tender in a dense forest of cacti.
I don't even think of him as a jailer.
His mind can be touched by the moan of the ocean:
He has become the ocean itself, and is thoroughly stagnant; and sailing that ocean
Prisoners are making journeys around the world, in the boats of their minds
In the bleak desert of a prison.

Song of the Dog and the Republic

The chained dog, being a dog, whines and sometimes barks
This being his constitutional right: he lives on leftovers;
He's used to injustice; his mind is desensitised;
He'd be shot dead if he took a chance to rebel and break free of his chain.
Every street resounds with the drums of 'Total Liberation'.
Friends, I ask an uncircumcised child what democracy means,
What you eat it with.
I ask an elderly mother wearing a worn out patched up sari
About the nutritive value of breast-feeding.
I ask a man working as hard as a bullock
What absolute fulfilment is, and what being stripped of everything means.
My mind goes crackers with riddles:
"A red palanquin with a green bar
That carries inside widows with shaven heads
Guess what it is?"
He, whose heart is turned to stone, whose skin is as tough as a rhino's,
Who's been stuffed with straw, hung in a museum,
His skull alone can stay expansive and serene.
How terrible is this age of robbery.
We can't even discuss the climate and the crops any longer;
In hunger's dark empire, where intestines lie empty,
A ferocious python is moving through the intestines.
We can't burst into tears.
Liberty, equality, fraternity.
Private property's banyan tree: everyone's equal before the law.

Eat, drink, be merry: go to hell
Ah! How amazing is this age of darkness.
We meet just for a cup of tea in a teashop, touch cup to cup, saucer to saucer,
Look into train schedules to make brief journeys.
The varied colourful Kumbh Mela of our existence gathers:
After suffering excessive stress we meet in public parks,
Play the tubercular flutes of our breath;
Poverty's two children—one's white, one's black
Play on a see-saw in the park of our sovereignty.
A bone-dry grave is carved upon our mind.
Songs celebrating democracy are pushed down our throat.
Hybrid seeds, hybrid seeds—what kind of pimps have brought hybrid seeds to us?
They don't take root in our flesh, they don't mix with our blood, and they don't flower, nor bear fruit.
The hybrid plant doesn't offer a shade to the tired and the tormented.
It doesn't fit like a readymade shirt; it doesn't heal a stabbed and wounded body.
We're becoming homeless; we're becoming orphaned;
Leaving our homes, we're returning to the graveyard;
We're digging out of the coffin the skeletons of our forty-two previous generations;
We're selling them for four annas a kilo; we're filling up the pit of living bones.
In a country that mints gold, a bazaar of bones is on show;
We've become holy wanderers on the waves of an illusion.
A gold male sparrow, a gold female sparrow,
They're fed gold; they're caged in gold, just as we're being sold.
How white are these travellers!
How white are these hunters!
They hold in their hands white rabbits hunted by them:
A white tablecloth's been laid on a table where they've laid them in a row.
They pull out the daggers at their waist;

Push them in crude haste into the private parts of the rabbits:
Blood spurts:
One's mind flutters as blood-soaked doves would in an attempt to fly.
Angels of peace hasten and fly towards heaven!
The song of the Republic is stamped upon this pandemonium:
Give alms so the eclipse will be over! Give alms so the eclipse will be over!

The Tree of Violence

It was destined to happen. Like a Tulsi Vrindavan, they planted violence in front of their door. Every day, they watered it with blood, and with great devotion. They fed it flesh as well to fertilise it. The Sun appeared in the morning on the Earth like a bridegroom, with impotence written all over his face. He died every evening a chronic death. Solar systems and galaxies continued to play their routine games of hide and seek. The tree of violence continued to flourish. Its every cell aimed at the sky. The city of smugglers, that sucked human blood, had a contraband air around it, and the tree just wallowed in it.

> 'Sai, sai, here comes Govinda
> Showering gulal all over me!'
> The tree danced! The tree sang!
> The tree sang and danced, as it went on a rampage.
> And then one day a miracle happened:

A holy man, schooled in the sophistry of parliamentary etiquette, passed by the tree. The hammer-like blows of the blinding light of the tree made him reel. One of his arteries burst.

He blacked out.
He fell to the ground.
A crowd gathered.
They took him to a hospital.
For days he remained in a coma.

Specialist physicians attended on him day and night. Media correspondents came from the world over to pray that the flame of his life would not be extinguished. His critical condition cast a shadow on the Union government. Every other minute, the Prime Minister called the Dean of the hospital.

'Has His Holiness recovered?'
'Hasn't His Holiness recovered yet?'

And the Dean said, again and again, 'No! No!'
And the Prime Minister's face darkened.
The press vended the images of His Holiness like daily milk.
Finally, by the good fortune of the nation, the holy man came to.
International mediapersons surrounded him with television camera crews
And played around his body.

He solemnly warned them about the alarming
Terror-tree's awesome propensities.
The next day headlines besieged the tree.
The fierce aspects of the tree filled column after newspaper column.
The fear of the tree weighed heavily on the entire city; warping it.
Ministers and their cronies berserk wanted to chop up the tree
From narrow little lanes in small towns to the nation's capital—
There was panic everywhere.
Hundreds of thousand woodcutters were commissioned to hack down the tree.
In the kitchens of state Assemblies and of Parliament itself
A menu to cut down the tree was given shape.
Ever-willing foreign experts were given a desperate call.
A campaign to cut down the tree was launched
All sorts of weapons and instruments were tried on the tree.

The tree couldn't be broken.
The tree couldn't be sawed off.
Not even a chip of its bark would come off.

Why doesn't the tree break?

Someone said, 'This is a tree of steel.'
Someone said, 'This is an iron tree.'

World-class experts in botany were invited.
They began to investigate the tree.
The tree wouldn't fit into metrics.
The tree defied analysis.
All the experts unanimously endorsed the opinion:
'This tree is the product of a unique chemical process.
Only a nuclear bomb
Can destroy it.'

To launch the campaign to decimate the tree
All the state Assemblies and the Parliament's Lower House that were shut down
Were opened again.
With the help of all the opposition parties, the ruling party initiated
A debate to discuss the means to destroy the tree.
They resorted to a voice-vote to determine
Whether to drop an atom bomb on the tree or not.
The entire Honourable House was in jitters.
There was a response: 'If a nuclear bomb is used,
It will finish us—and not this tree.'
Some said, 'This n-bomb is just a paper tiger.'
Some said, 'The government is passive.'

A lifeless government.
A frozen government.

The government couldn't speak, the government couldn't move.
The government's brain stopped working.
The plan to drop a nuclear bomb on the tree was scrapped.

The entire country suffered from a gnawing anxiety about the tree.
Ministers lost their appetite.
Ministers lost their sleep.
Ministers stopped eating.
Ministers stopped drinking water.
Ministers couldn't shit...
Their condition was like Hamlet's.
They dreamt of the unstoppable, tangled, ever-growing roots of the tree.

Armed commando units were dispatched, like packs of wolves, to search and destroy the tree's roots.
They searched farms, they searched forests, and they searched workshops.
Every nook and corner of the country was searched.
Under their boots got trampled and crushed
Little children,
Juveniles, youth,
Mothers, fathers, entire neighbourhoods,
Tender seedlings and shoots in fields.

The government went on a rampage more violent than the tree's.
Its echoes resounded in Parliament.
A new Bhagat Singh came into being.
The refined air of Parliament was fouled by the smoke of a Molotov cocktail.
Parliament began to float in the molten lava that followed the explosion.

'Garibi Hatao'.
'Nationalisation'.
The draconian black law called 'MISA'
The freezing of wages.

Like hounded hares, the palanquin-bearers of democracy ran for their lives.

The walls of prisons.
Hollow walls.
People's foot-soldiers who bragged,
'Our chests are made of steel, they can't get cracked'
Found their torture-chambers afloat in the flowing lava
Salvos of 'Inquilaab Zindabaad'—'Long Live the Revolution!'
Came in fusillades from all directions
The wounds of the tree began to heal
The tree started dancing in ecstasy in Gokul
Every city, every village that was covered by the tree was dug up
The whole nation was bulldozed
Finally they found the roots of the tree
In the Havelis of the Zamindars and in their Mehfils
Finally the roots of the tree were found
In the safety-vaults of capitalists and monopolists
Finally the roots of the tree were found
Under the throne of the Empress
Hellhounds and hit-men on red alert were summoned in the end
The tree was cut down
A prolonged siren was sounded
The danger had been averted

The tree got broken
At the same time
The tree was born
It sprouted and took root, it turned into many trees
Those who brought up the tree
Walked out on their own homes
They laughed their way to the gallows
Because they knew it for sure
That as long as the circumstances that gave birth to the tree were not rooted out
The tree was not destined to die
Really, the tree cannot die
But multiply it will—by the hundreds, by the thousands, by the millions, and by the billions
The public will kill it in broad daylight,
It will overflow into rice-fields, and foul up the Parliament, it will run
Over the ghettos of the untouchables, the mangs and the mehetars,
The mahars and the chambhars, into the fields and into the factories:
They will all weave and wave streamers and pennants for the Gate of a new nation
And the tree of violence will perform the role of the tree of wish-fulfilment
Yes, it will be a cornucopia for the newborn nation.

from

Tuhi Yatta Kanchi (1981)

(What's Your Grade?)

Kamatipura

The nocturnal porcupine reclines here
Like an alluring grey bouquet
Wearing the syphilitic sores of centuries
Pushing the calendar away
Forever lost in its own dreams

Man's lost his speech
His god's a shitting skeleton
Will this void ever find a voice, become a voice?

If you wish, keep an iron eye on it to watch
If there's a tear in it, freeze it and save it too
Just looking at its alluring form, one goes berserk
The porcupine wakes up with a start
Attacks you with its sharp aroused bristles
Wounds you all over, through and through
As the night gets ready for its bridegroom, wounds begin to blossom
Unending oceans of flowers roll out
Peacocks continually dance and mate

This is hell
This is a swirling vortex
This is an ugly agony
This is pain wearing a dancer's anklets

Shed your skin, shed your skin from its very roots
Skin yourself
Let these poisoned everlasting wombs become disembodied.
Let not this numbed ball of flesh sprout limbs
Taste this
Potassium cyanide!
As you die at the infinitesimal fraction of a second,
Write down the small 's' that's being forever lowered.

Here queue up they who want to taste
Poison's sweet or salt flavour
Death gathers here, as do words,
In just a minute, it will start pouring here.

O Kamatipura,
Tucking all seasons under your armpit
You squat in the mud here
I go beyond all the pleasures and pains of whoring and wait
For your lotus to bloom.
—A lotus in the mud.

Hunger

1.

Hunger,
Only one thing one could, or couldn't, do:
Be able to prove the theorem, or to fail to:
Can the fire of hunger be turned into poetry?
Will the fire of hunger destroy music?
He who can't count his own pulse beats
Finds music inaccessible.
Hunger, we didn't realise
That a fee would be charged for singing a song for capital assets.

Hunger,
A fruitless thing:
However hard you work, for wages you get paid in stones;
If one can't build a house of stones
One can't live in it.
Hunger, at times you assume the form of a mouse, at times you become a cat, and a lion sometimes;
How can we, weak ones, face
This game started by you and dare to play it?

2.

Hunger,
A cagey silence grows everywhere.

It is the first day of our new life sentence.
Hunger, forgive us,
For we can't hack the tree of time;
Even if it's felled, the sky is going to remain blue.
To what market can we take a voiceless heart?
Where can we put it on auction?
Where every day sweeps life away,
Who'll buy a crushed heart?
Who'll find it worth bargaining for?

Hunger; explain your strategy, your tactics to us.
If we could ever become cunning enough,
We'd like to engage you in a final wrestling bout.
How long can we let ourselves be dragged along, trying to contain you everywhere in our body?
How often can we wash the dirt off our hunger?
How often can we wash the dust off our years?
How long can we go on loathing the limit of loathsomeness?
Hunger, if you and we cannot be connected
By an iron bridge,
Allow us to fly away like an unsuspecting bird.

Hunger; your soil; the spikes in your soil
Keep stinging us in the brain all day and night;
In the end, the brain itself freezes.
Hunger; when one pulls a thing out of a freezer,
Is it always fresh?

Hunger; your blood runs cold;
Hunger; your blood runs silent.
Hunger; give us the orders—let lightning flash in our guts;
Hunger; you just give the orders—let our lives be charged.
The hurt ocean and the prolonged moan of our demand;
Hunger; accept our demand.
Do not put out the orphaned huts on the coastline.
We shall witness, later,
The gold-embroidered conflict
Between grief's snail
And the ocean.

3.

Hunger;
We've made our demand.
Let you need us.
Won't we ever take root?
Let us take root.
The Sun may have forgotten daybreak;
The river may have forgotten time.
We wanted to ask of light
Something more than illuminated life
But the light itself let us down.

Hunger;
We won't allow clouds to stand at our door merely as indifferent pillars.

How much longer should we
Be grateful for our sorrow?
For the music that our sorrow contains?
What right do we have to fight with flowers
When we're unable even to set up homes?
How long should we go on trying to light the fuse of our sorrow?
How long should we continue to burn ourselves?
How long should we try to catch the flames of this fire?
We shall salute you as defeated soldiers,
If we can't find our own cognition
In this fiery flow of the sun.
Who says all soldiers in an army
Fight as heroes do?

4.

Hunger;
Today we haven't got a grain of food left to eat.
Today, there's not a single wise soul left in our house.
Hunger;
If one went on singing till one reached the last flicker in the soul,
Would the light of hunger go out?
Hunger: if we preserve you any longer, everything will turn dark.
Hunger; your fashion's unique.
You're the last whore
We can make love to.
If we can't get laid with you,
If we can't get you pregnant,

Our entire tribe would have to kill itself.
Hunger; we hold the ace,
We've nothing to say about the music eunuchs make.
Our virility confronts you.
Let's see who wins—we or you.

5.

Hunger;
What comes first—
The tree or the seed?
Hunger; you turn the question into a conundrum.
Hunger, just tell us, to what race does this ape belong.
If you can't answer that, we'll fuck seventeen generations of you.
We'll fuck your mother, hunger…

Ode to Dr Ambedkar: 1978

EQUALITY FOR ALL
OR
DEATH TO INDIA

Never hereafter
Must one write anything
Shrouded in obscurity.
No longer must one indulge
In oblique poetry.
No longer must one erratically swoop.
One should catch it by its very roots:
This nation's just continued to proliferate
Like a castor plant

And we
Were lured by its useless shabby leaves
We drooled at them
Played with our own saliva's sticky trickle

They're not going to reciprocate our love
They've become a deceit unto themselves
We can only clutch out a piece of our own flesh
Let the torrent of our own blood continue to rush

They are raging with arrogance

They've become psychopathic
Violence, slaughter, bloodshed
They're polluted with inevitable stink
They turn everyone into Oedipus
They want to partition this land
They want riots
They want to turn man into a demon
They'd like mankind to lose its humanity once again
Ashes and skeletons
They want to sing in a graveyard
Their soil/their brain/their hole
Their ailment/their blood

Are they the only ones who've come forth from a human mother's womb?
Are the rest of us the progeny of cats and dogs?
What sort of an illusion is it in which they live?
How many vices have they become the slaves of?
Greed and thirst:
Their whole world of desires is about to go bust.
They've refused to accept life
They turn their faces upward and spit towards the sky.
Will that ever stigmatise the sky?
They've blackened their own mouths
By speaking vile of others.
Will that ever reduce their burden of sin?

Now they must stop this.
Now they must change.

They must mend their own ways
Before trying to correct others.

You've gone far ahead of
The pedestal of your statue.
You've grown larger than the name of the nation.
Never did you sit like a sterile hen hatching eggs laid by others.
You changed all our lives
Like a great flow of thought.
How can we now bypass that truth?
We've to become like those whose very life-breath is luminous.
We've to become like those whose deep shade comforts all.
Real honesty is found in one's own inner voice.

You were not a dogmatist.
Your vision was liberal.
Weeding and clearing the woods, you created a level field,
You created a bend in history that was difficult to achieve—an outstanding feat.
You handed it to us.
You stand shining in front of us.
You did not allow us to remain mystified.
My life is now a cleansed crystal.
My life now goes galloping beyond death.

You became the human pivot for all dalits.
You did not mind those who spoke against you.

You did not turn away from those who ridiculed you.
You stood like a rock with your feet firmly planted
In the body of an Earth that had lost her gravity,
To counter the wrong stances of your detractors.
You spoke out hard and clear:
For your purpose was to liberate man.
The same heart in which you contained all tolerance,
You let the volcano of revolt become active.
Yours was not a blind revolt.
It was for changing oneself, for changing the world.
New eyes; a new heart.
You believed in awakening; not in terrorising.
Your awakening was founded upon study and service.

You lived up to your first name:
You were strong enough to uproot mighty banyan trees.
You raised weapons
Not as mercenaries do;
You raised them against injustice.
You performed God's autopsy.
You cut off the nose of the folk-goddess whom the ignorant try to appease
To ward off disease;
You shoved into sewage
All those hollow folk-tales that speak of heaven and hell, karmic merit and the burden of sin;
You deprived the 33 crore sucker gods of their business making their shops empty;
You set water ablaze;

Your voice had authority;
You could command the heavens to fall;
You could order the seasons on a flourishing forward march;
You quarrelled with the world;
You played with fire;
You composed music in a storm.
Sorrow;
The origin of sorrow;
Liberation from sorrow;
The path of liberation.
You tended with compassion even soil that was given up as unusable.
You tolerated the company of loathsome people;
Separation from loved ones;
You controlled desire; frustration as well.
The meaning of life; that is sorrow.
The meaning of old age; that is sorrow.
The meaning of illness; that is sorrow.
The meaning of death; that is sorrow.

O inheritor of conflict!
You feed us things both in the short term as well as in the long;
You've made the human being transparent to us.
We can see through every human being.

They think human beings are completely blind;
They think human beings are inferior;

They think human beings are a helpless lot;
They are afraid of the shadow of man;
They wear armour to shield themselves;
They let anthills grow on their own bodies;
They suffocate; they're galled; they spit venom.

Never hereafter must one write anything shrouded in obscurity
One must plough it all up with a donkey pulling the yoke—and start from the scratch.

EQUALITY FOR ALL
OR
DEATH FOR INDIA
—and carved on the heart
Ambedkar: 1978

Sweet Baby Poverty

Sweet baby poverty born of all our anguish.
Brothers, don't wreak vengeance just 'cause we couldn't
Celebrate its naming with a lavish dinner—

Look at the sly little one in its baby clothes, so sweet,
It may droop before it can bloom
Put a dark spot of blood on its forehead to protect it from evil eyes.
Sell your hardships cheap so this baby can snuggle and play in your arms
Your eyes couldn't light it up, nor could you swing it in the cradle of your arms,
But, brothers, you can still sing:
'Let's fall down and rise up – to let grow what we have!'
You can't lose your heart just 'cause the baby's got a nasty cold.
Has it got cramps in its belly? Maybe there's an ache in there.
Is it shitting water? Maybe it's got rickets.
Is it crying too much? Hollering'll make it stronger.

Come, O cow, into the cowshed!
Fill our little one's cup with your milk!
Out, out you bitch! Scram on your doglegs!
My baby so loves the cream on its milk!

O little girl, my sweetheart, my gold chip,
Honey, your arms and your legs are pure silver!
Don't step out my darling, be careful,
Or the boys out there'll catch you and beat you up!

Brothers, lift up this little one with all the care in the world.
It'll pee on your shirts, be watchful.
Child born of all our anguish, sweet baby poverty.

from

Khel (1983)

(Play)

Untitled Poem I

I have seen him
I have rejected him often
My corpse that wanders
From town to town
Wait in this evening's glow and stand still
A drunk is dialing God's number
Don't show me such pity
That degrades
May be our relationship is all spent
Shrug your shoulders and get rid of it
So that you could
Axe this water a couple of times

Untitled Poem 2

The Self sheds its dead skin in water
Again a growing creeper climbs the new skin
The tree of yearning that begins to burn in the artificial summer/
Beyond them are your sailorly eyes and the lightning flashing in them/
From somewhere in your absence comes the signal
And the sea arrives strolling to the shore
Youth's butterfly floating around the bellybutton of nudity
The white snail of your breasts crawls inside my body
Water walks without feet
So the rain begins to play in the heart
The fire of voluptuousness starts its dance again after so many days/
Each thing unfolds its inner space
The calves of cedars start waltzing to the swing of the orchestra/
A soft insistent knocking on the door of dreams
O my consort
Pink antelopes of wishes
Butterflies of hibiscus kisses
The Sun's coin of entranced flashes
How did this pierced opening of love reach right up to here
A wounded dog circles itself
Will the roots of this auspicious sleep get hurt?

from

Gandu Bagicha (1986)

(Arsefuckers Park)

Arsefuckers Park–I

There are neither flowers
Nor leaves;
Neither trees
Nor birds.
All this is mimicry by mercy of His grace:
Sealed fragrance of musk.
Thus the chains on one's legs are transformed
Into music…

O revealed friend! O gardener!
What shall I recall?
Tears flood the soil of your sensibility.
In the morning and in the evening,
On your sterile field of silence,
Home Guards perform their drill.
On some festive day, a pederast politician
A Councillor preaches here.
The dancing water-pot of goddess Yellamma.
And an all-India women's conference…

Pimps confessing
To a study group of streetwalkers.
Politicised crows listening to the proceedings.
Charas smokers, ganja smokers;
Pickpockets and thieves.

A mortal forest in the hurt heart.
O Arsefuckers Park!
What sad hour you've chosen
To strike at my roots.
Praise and curse;
Arousal and ears.
An eternity of darkness
Lined by a golden shore.
The deluge and all hell breaking loose;
And
Diamond garlands.
The stigma of concealed love and
The harried soul;
The Inferno of lovers' separation and the graveyard of compassion;
Extreme loneliness and the magic of the frightened;
Behind every word,
There's a naked face hidden.
How can I yoke these slaves of the bed to my plough?

Arsefuckers Park!
Your city of insatiable angels.

I bear a crown of agony on my head;
A luminous fountain of African anguish;
A wound has found its home in my heart—
Even words cannot open its doors.
A bear made of sunbeams is walking around with a banner.
No complaint can be registered here.

A wretched derelict of a poet like me
Starts dancing to corrupted words in a saint's festival.
There are neither slogans nor shrieks of pain.
Every face of compassion wears a black veil.
You are allowing your downtrodden life to swim
In the hell-water of self-alienation.
What more can even the trees do now
Except scratch the armpits of bygone times?
Let me fill into my eyes
The darkness in the womb of the soil.
Allow me to listen to the counterfeit jingle of the coin
Of my distraught, sleek-necked dreams.
Allow me just once
To plaster the cracks in the sky of contemporary anguish.

Wearing a white shroud,
A formless silence sleeps in your courtyard.

And the sarcastic scrawl of the bleeding piles in the alphabet chart swells up;
A mottled piglet tries to fondle grass…
The impotence inherent in good and evil;
The supernatural fingers caressing tresses of hair;
Female buffaloes of a high-yielding breed go on a rampage
In midnight's outburst of ejaculations.
The master physicians handling them find themselves paralysed.
In a hall of mirrors there's a chaos of mocking reflections…
How many images of oneself can one see?
Horses are being tattooed on my arms.

The creeping plant of my penis is about to flower.
Ibsen's Doll is about to get married.
All this pining is to get out
Of this circular battle-trap.
The black truth seeks to ride the tortoise.
I see you on your moral path with the cataracts and the tear-peals in your anguished eyes.
After that, I remember your silent lips;
The distressed insect of your distorted body
Getting its wings painted.
The owl in the hollow of a tree intones its drone.
And you, you refuse to open the door of your perception.
Shall I now put on the boot of amazement on my lame foot?
Shall I now bell the cat?
Or shall I scrape off this intolerable grotesquery?
Shall I put out the flame
That glows between the beginning and the end?

Speculations on a Shirt

Crossing over a period of painful love-play,
Let's reject the traditional garden of conventions.

Let's change the sex of Eve.
Let's make Adam pregnant.
Let's speculate beyond animal anxieties.
Hell's quagmire.
The Moon acts like a pimp
In the history of human bonds.
The bull of sexual passion masticates
On a disembodied heath.
We sail in a sinking ship
And turn into savages.
Just plain cloves burn our tongue;
And we are afraid of light.
This is how liberation itself punishes a human being.

A human being shouldn't become so spotless.
One should leave a few stains on one's shirt.
One should carry on oneself a little bit of sin.

New Delhi, 1985

The needle probes for the artery;
Enemies of poetry gather in your city.

Your town is cursed with power;
Roses flow in this stream of blood;
The waters of your Yamuna stand exposed.

India Gate:
Over there, the Rashtrapati Bhavan.
How ruthlessly has this city been combed and groomed!
White elephants sway at the gate of the past.
Goldsmiths mould replicas of peacocks.
Your well-carpentered glory.
Long Kashmiri carpets are rolled out in your streets.
Armed regiments on alert;
The showy itch of culture;
Wooing guests, dancing before them;
Parading cavalry;
Anti-aircraft guns;
Nuclear missiles to frighten off enemies;
The President accepting a salute from those hanging between the sky and the earth;
The Prime Minister shaking hands
With the glorified blemished.
Bravo!
What a spectacular festival.

Cruelty

I am a venereal sore in the private part of language.
The living spirit looking out of hundreds of thousands of sad, pitiful eyes
Has shaken me.
I am broken by the revolt exploding inside me.
There's no moonlight anywhere;
There's no water anywhere.
A rabid fox is tearing off my flesh with its teeth;
And a terrible venom-like cruelty
Spreads out from my monkey-bone.

Release me from my infernal identity.
Let me fall in love with these stars.
A flowering violet has begun to crawl towards horizons.
An oasis is welling up on a cracked face.
A cyclone is swirling in irreducible vulvas.
A cat has commenced combing the hairs of agony.
The night has created space for my rage.
A stray dog has started dancing in the window's eye.
The beak of an ostrich has begun to break open junk.
An Egyptian carrot is starting to savour physical reality.
A poem is arousing a corpse from its grave.
The doors of the self are being swiftly slammed shut.
There's a current of blood flowing through all pronouns now.
My day is rising beyond the wall of grammar.
God's shit falls on the bed of creation.

Pain and roti are being roasted in the same tandoor's fire.
The flame of the clothless dwells in mythologies and folklore.
The rock of whoring is meeting live roots;
A sigh is standing up on lame legs;
Satan has started drumming the long hollowness.
A young green leaf is beginning to swing at the door of desire.
Frustration's corpse is being sewn up.
A psychopathic muse is giving a shove to the statue of eternity.
Dust begins to peel armour.
The turban of darkness is coming off.
You, open your eyes: all these are old words.
The creek is getting filled with a rising tide;
Breakers are touching the shoreline.

Yet, a venom-like cruelty spreads out from my monkey-bone.

It's clear and limpid: like the waters of the Narmada river.

A Long Wait

The huge city is empty and the lake of the night seems to stretch too far.
The eyelids are heavy and the doors of ego about to be shut.
So, the water will continue to burn.
Why should we hold on to our sensitivity?
Rain romps in the terrain of your fragility.
After a magically clear sky, transparency is itself turning cloudy.
Through rivers, we are merging into the Arabian Sea.
Time's sussurating she-cobra slithers in her serpentine way.
The ship will arrive at dawn tomorrow.
As we drown deeper and deeper into the inner realms of its water,
We can only continue our long wait for the ocean's compassion.

from

Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi (1995)

(The Soul Doesn't Find Peace in this Regime)

Alchemy

You belong
To my innermost core

Along the shadow of your vision
I reach the absolute frontier of palpable pleasure

The unfolding flower of the month of Chaitra
A touch of bottomless despondency
My exiled life-breath circling eternity
What I present here is the little world of my own lasting hurt

Your astral space is so inviting to my mind
That my tiny soul is
Drenched in its deathless rain

Punishment

From what great height did you push me down
I've fallen so low in my own eye
That I can neither keep myself alive nor just yet let me die

This is my punishment for me
The mirrored reflection that I thought was the truth for me
Liberty was a synonym for that truth
What the hell did I know of the meaning of liberty?

I let flow into my veins all the overflowing pleasure of the physical world
I blew up the will to the transcendental by planting dynamite in my own wishes
So now I too run desperately from one shore to the other
I become so inhuman that I cut myself from me
I didn't even notice it when the savage deluge swept my entire farm away

I am calling out to you from the depths of a maelstrom sucking me
O who will it be that might answer my call and
Give me a helping hand?
My fantasies of multi-storeyed pleasure were merely
A midnight's dream
When I woke up in the morning it was nowhere

In my smitten mind a wound screams in agony
A wound that bleeds around the clock
That neither would I sew up the wound nor keep it open

Its fiery sting strikes my every bone
And I am watching all this in a mirror
The tree of sensual gratification rocks with laughter

From what great height did you push me?

Worry

After making love to oneself there wasn't another sky to marry
And over there the merchants have already anchored their ship

The intense core of the compassionate self is freeing itself from self-pity's promises
The path was easy to walk but the magic jewels of self-indulgence didn't fall away

I do not wish to get chained to this God-created hell
For me every day brings a smile to the lips of fortune
Whether the ambrosial cloud rains immortality or not
I don't wish to entomb myself here in a trance
As for me I still have to worry
About tomorrow's bread

People

Gradually, people start coming out of the body

Mourning begins to stalk them with its consummate, cat-like eyes

Till yesterday, night alone was the enemy, the day has joined it now
My skin is already dead; how long can I go on changing it?
This dead ball shadow without an identity: they've built
A pyramid above me and gone; inscribing inscrutable
Hieroglyphs on these solid walls shuddering in fear

My lifeless cadaver lies serenely tangled in the spider's web
Who weaves this criss-cross trap, this mesh?
These enticing nooses come from everywhere to strangle me
Generation after untouchable generation has resulted in me
And this is how I lost the village of my dreams
Its green mynah, its green tree
My being is broken into two
In a flash this flood has swept me into its torrent, too
I thought I'd be able to cross this mire of hell
That, like a lotus, I'd spring out this muck and bloom
Worm follows worm, germ follows germ
How utterly trivial this trickle of sewage in the spring!
I blossomed and I withered
Without even time to arrange a decent funeral for me
People who'd left the body are returning to the body
And I am fighting for air

Concomitantly: December 6

Now
This city is no longer mine
It was only yesterday that you told us
That this country belonged to us
Tell us now, is this country really ours?
The walls of my own house charge upon me
They want to assassinate me
Digging up dead bodies from the past the enemies are busy
Playing the politics of chastisement
How can I tell these people
That the past is like a gecko's tail
Shed and wriggling by it?
Who are these people—my own, my countrymen?
Usurpers of yore who seized my country
These are their rites, their ritual chants
God or religion?
Yesterday they murdered Gandhi
Now they want to put the whole nation to death
How many stories of alien invaders shall I tell them?
My original ancestors were dark Dravidian non-Aryans
Followed by Scythians, Huns, Kushans, Turks, Iranians and Afghans
Then white soldiers in uniform and the Firangs
Mixtures of races and castes
The soil of this country never practised untouchability
Today in Iran

Not even a diseased dog would care to piss
On the cadavers of their forebears
Yet in their blue eyes burns the fire of vengeance
With the blade of terror they have slit
The throats of babies and young ones
They have butchered people as though they were goats
Hiding behind the genital they are searching for their religion
The soil of Ayodhya the footsteps of Valmiki and Rama made sacred—in the Uttara Kanda
These people made that soil blind
That very soil has entered their eyes
Transformed into the profane

It was only yesterday that you told us
Anybody can overturn
A Hitler
But
Only one who claims to be of the majority can become a dictator
And at that point the human species begins to degrade

Tell me, have we really reached
The point of decline?

Today is the day of your remembrance
Whether you like it or not
Let me too raise my hand to commit violence
Perhaps these usurpers' heads can be brought back to sense
If they are hit hard

Death is a better alternative to fear
Rather than get buggered; butcher them back
Then bring them back to life, and then kill them again
I too would like to be martyred
For my people's sake.

Autobiography

The face you find stirred up on the surface of water is mine:
The foaming crown on the raised wave
About to touch a pride poised between time and space.
Hell's bastions of suffering have begun to crumble and fall.
I've made myself tired and unhappy here on this seashore of pain;
Sculpting with a chisel an image of many-faceted wounds.
The gossamer mantle of Being fluttering in the wind;
A fierce foreplay of light and dark creating its urgent rage
Formless skies; wistful; as the transparent birds of dreams fly away.
The flowers of inner awareness, beginning to bloom, have no fragrance;
Like a snake, I too shed my skin; this touch of icy water cuts all passion's cords.
Don't blow a soothing breath on the surface of water now, or my memoirs will lose their face.

Miracle

The traditions of this theatre have so much exploited my anguish,
I find no difference between a tragedy and a comedy now.
The tamasha of fate, the dashavatars of suffering;
How time has flown! How much water under the bridge!
Even the tree of sterility has finally blossomed.
This soil treated me as an outsider;
This air turned its back on me;
What took pity on me in the end was the sky that has no limits.

Poetry Notebook

I've arrived at the final point of my journey;
Yet you refuse to open the door for me.
How can I inscribe a star on this worn out page in my book?

I'd given my poetry notebook
Long ago to Kabir as a keepsake.
But there's no Kabir in this bazaar.
The one who stands here accosting passers-by is me.

This charter of freedom does not accept my tradition.
In this empire of darkness, even aspiration sprouts wings!

Comes the Day, Passes the Day

We walked the way
We shouldn't have walked

As we went further even darkness became familiar
A lonesome wind reeling through the city's autobiography
An ethos of treachery
A search for the root of all agony

Yesterday, only darkness rustled like a million leaves here.
Today, the whole inner world is electrified.
After so long, it's started to rain
On the untouchable earth.

We lived the day as it came to us
We shat out the day as it went away

For Vincent Van Gogh

Sunflowers truly are
The self-expression of your
Experience.
But, brother,
You've forgotten to paint
One of the colours of the sun!

To a Friend

Roots come out from the inside, broken apart in such a way
That our kinship in a common soil
Becomes, my friend,
A distorted relationship

How did a standing crop
Wither in the blink of an eye?
Time squats here chewing its cud
That moist heart filled up to its brim with moist black soil
Where has it disappeared?
Blight has enveloped the tree of desire
It's a season of plenty, yet its days have only turned
Women into widows with shaven heads
And you, my friend, embrace a corpse and cling to it in such a season.
Life is darkness and existence only an accident.

The falcon zooms high into the sky.
You feel helpless.
Stop crawling in the sand if you are terrified.

A Tree or a Woman Laden with Many Branches?

A homeless sky
Of orphaned clouds
Darkness is the ghost that keeps the side-alleys awake
The blind have all set out on their journey towards light

A secular soil covers the seeds of the alphabet;
What communalism has stigmatised the Moon?
Our collective cacophony withholds the vital juices of life.
Don't we see the green harvest gracefully dancing in the wind?
I kick the arse of self-reflection in an unpeopled solitude,
Duality's self-revealing shadow spreading across the ground.
What is it that coddles me?
Is that a tree, or a woman laden with many branches?

from

Mee Marale Sooryachya Rathache Ghode Saat (2005)

(I Slew the Seven Horses of the Chariot of the Sun)

The wicked have injured the Earth
Poets know all about it
Only poets can save the Earth
From extinction

I Slew the Seven Horses of the Chariot of the Sun

It's a tradition of self-adulation: the corpse of culture
We're tired, but are carrying it on and on…
O Sun! O Spy, who witnesses
All. That's why I slew the seven horses of your chariot.

Whether we're being born or whether we're dying
Wicked friend, you keep an eye on us.
What shall I address you as?—And how?
O bull in heat running wild all through our village in destructive fury!

O heartless rock in heaven!
O lover of dawn!
O illustrator of the peopled world! O distortion of fire!
O vast body continuously smouldering round the hours!
O owner of the finest glowing silk!
O eternally potent virile seed, do I know you?

The space that contains you, me and us all
Spewed forth the cosmic core
The stars, the planets, you and your solar family:
I know the age of the Earth;
I know the secret of life on Earth;
I know of your umbilical prolapse;
I know the gravitational pull
Between you and this shabby planet on which I live.

I know the distance of light-years that separates your planets from their star;
I know the structure of the Earth;
I know its outer crust and its iron and its nickel;
I know its core and yours;
I know the space that pervades your universe and mine;
Its infinity has neither beginning nor end;
It is primordial darkness without an end.
On the stage of this primordial darkness you've laid
A décor of luminosity.
O theatre player performing a play of luminescence!
I and all of us understand your constant journey.

O Master of white light
Spinning the disc of seven colours!
Those furiously galloping 'Etesh' horses driving your chariot in top speed:
You've crushed our dreams under their ruthless hooves.
You, who rob us of our stellar universes,
You've allowed the wicked
To rob us of our standing crops.
You've assigned us
To the very tyrants who'd starve us to death.
You've let them
Molest and rape our mothers and sisters;
You've protected those marauders without blinking.
You haven't opened your innumerable eyes of fire
To cremate they
Who've burned down our homes.
They sucked our blood

Like a body stung by leeches:
You closed your eyes.
They thrashed us with lashes barbed with injustice,
Till our bare backs were skinned and bloodied.
Yet you didn't even sigh in sympathy.
They shackled us;
They robbed us of our freedom.
They trapped us in a vicious mesh of religion and caste
To turn us into their slaves: they made us slaves
And threw us into dark dungeons.
Concepts of justice and injustice are only man-made.
But you, O Devil,
Who are the living dead on constant fire,
Couldn't you make the difference between the right and the wrong?
You gave a nod in favour of tyranny.

What's a good act? What's an evil act?
What's heaven? What's hell?
O enormous burning worm
Moving in the light of hell;
O Narasimha constantly burning within himself;
You scorch our skin;
You pour infernal fire upon our heads;
O lord of the universe of light;
Take that crown of light off your head;
Your light has
Darkened our universe;
That invincible armour blessed by you

And those potent weapons given by you
Were of no use to us in our battle;
Your mirror is shattered as far as we are concerned:
You couldn't provide a tin pot to collect water from our leaking roof;
You couldn't make our starving mothers lactate;
You're just a cracked mirror;
Why do you display your Moon and your stars to the hungry?
You couldn't become the right hand of our sister in a skirt and a blouse
To wipe off her runny nose;
You couldn't become coals in our stoves;
You couldn't cook our chickpeas;
You watched the distress sale of our cows and buffaloes without any compassion;
You stared coldly at our barren land teeming with poverty;
You just kept looking at our ghetto and its epidemics;
You couldn't eradicate the flies and the mosquitoes
That bred in the shit and the sewage and the garbage of our lives;
O guardian angel
Of those who ruin our life-cycle!
Return to us our farms and fields;
Nullify the fraudulent change of hands
That robbed us of our lands;
Punish the landowners and the feudal lords
Whom caste and money have made powerful and arrogant.
Return to us the rain that belongs to us
And irrigates our crops.
Return to us our autumns and winters;
Give back to us our months of receding rains
When sunlight and showers play hide and seek;

Give back to us the breeze
That refreshes our tired and weary soul.
End, once for all, this age of exhaustion.
Let melodies be played on the flute again;
Let drums beat once more;
Let the village band make music that resounds in space and reaches up the sky.
Let the anklets in our women's feet begin to jingle again.
Let the River Yamuna be brimmed once more.
Let cattle moo happily roaming in woods and pastures;
Let calves romp about;
Let peacocks dance once again in our Vrindavan.
O friend and enemy of generation after generation of us!
End the Sahara deserts that occupy the length of our lives;
Finish the dense forests our lives have become;
Terminate the scorpions, the snakes, the thorns, the beasts that come in our way;
Eliminate all the wicked forces that menace us—
The hurricanes, the blizzards, the earthquakes—end them all;
O wretched one! O wind of negation
Sweeping away all that we wish and aspire to be!
You could not protect our bodies
Composed of chemicals, minerals and liquids.
O heartless god!
We refuse to become members of your clan.
O keeper of cosmic records!
You record every turn of nature, every change in matter and life;
And yet how neutral, how apathetic you are!
O greater among all stones!
Your solar sovereignty has such limited power.

You rise in the morning; at noon you burn overhead;
You give us a slip in the evening without keeping any promise.
We are used to your ways.
We are used to your insensitive behaviour, your indifferent attitude.
Where have you lost that invisible bond
Between you and us?
When did you cut off the cords that tied us together?
There's no way we can put out the fire of your disease.
The night's ended. Days have ended. Months have ended.
Years have ended. Leap years have ended, too.
Ages and epochs have ended.
The light within us is about to be finished.
The touch-me-not plants are drooping;
Flowers are drooping.
Our flowers are shutting their petals.
O electric eel of the River Amazon in space!
You were unable to give shocks to the world of the wicked.
Liberate the universe of us, the poor.
Or have you turned into a stellar amoeba yourself?
O python swallowing up
All the life within us.
We don't want to live an uncertain life
That depends on chance.
We refuse to be puppets on a string
Pulled by a governor of our destiny
Who has no pedigree.
Someone pulls the string and it's a new Epoch
Someone else comes along and pulls the string and it's another Age.

Satya: Treta: Dwapara: Kali Yuga.
The naked infant of our existence in the Kali Yuga
Pisses in your direction,
O devil among devils!
Do shower some kindness on it.
We slaved away for generations
We were worn-out and died
While we hoped for good luck and happiness.
O beguiling spy! O grand illusion of gravitation!
Bond with our family;
Become our kin.
From now on, live for us; die for us.
And if that does not happen,
As of now, you're nobody to us.
O great brazenfaced one!
I slay the seven horses of your chariot
And break its wheel.

With a God who Isn't

Ode to Prajakti Thorat

Once the mystery of the universe was revealed to me
My desire to write poetry was dead.

Too late past the pitch-black midnight
I begin to recall your kohl-streaked eyelashes
I begin to recall them
And they start taking me far
Far away from myself...
Nowadays I feel very lonely
As though I'm afraid of my own shadow...
I'd worked too hard to build my world
Now I'm seeing it falling apart

That moment my life became an image
Of the apocalypse
Like Picasso's *Guernica*.
O simple and innocent girl
Why did you put the flowers of prajakta in my palm?
To suddenly open the elemental gate of primeval love?
I'm now scared of all these people,
My kith and kin, the whole world.
All of them were distanced from me long since.
I'm scared that I'll lose you too.
Having put the flowers of prajakta in my palm,

You've put me in such a fix.

You were at one end of the world, I was at the other:
Didn't realise when the distance between us closed.
The unfathomable universe its space and its force of gravity
The lotus that bloomed from the navel of Brahma
And the blind eye of the lust of my dust.
I stopped defining love
After experiencing its fierce challenge.
After your guileless discourse on love,
I didn't dare to redefine love.
There are many ways beasts and humans make love;
The limit of their love is coitus.
If a human being begins to behave as a beast
It can't be human love.

I'm no longer driven by a thirst to possess, I'm no longer bonded by attachments:
Yet there's a demon torturing me.
I'm luckless, I'm helpless.
I can't ask to hold your hand again.
I can't spit out the poison of my entire life gathered in my mouth
To kiss you again with my cleansed lips.
I didn't want any sympathy from you by complaining against my past.
I didn't seek to impose on you
The ongoing conflict between darkness and light in my life.
I'm not an idiot to leave in the wind after me
A self-aggrandising wedding procession.
After experiencing moments of being orphaned,

I'd come to you seeking succour.
I was the proof of my one-sided love;
In a manner of speaking, the fire was only on one side.

I remember your question
How many times were you burned like this?
I couldn't tell you the unfinished story of fulfilled love
Love that transcended the country, love that transcended the self
What was it that terrorised me so much
That I presented a rose to you without its thorns?
It's just a convention to offer flowers and leaves
As symbols of love...Today both human life and the world are going through
Ecological change
Tomorrow if people presented nuclear warheads to one another as symbols of love,
It shouldn't be regarded as strange behaviour.
Lovers these days don't shoot paper arrows at their beloved;
Nowadays they turn the tender torment of their palpitating hearts
Into a miniature missile,
And shoot it precisely at their target.
To present my one-sided love to you,
I gave you a white rose;
I thought it would fill
The generation gap between you and me.
I didn't know then
That a rose had ceased to be a symbol of love.
I came from the forest of love, crossing forest after forest of love,
To arrive in your flourishing mega-city;
To arrive in your strange new world.

Wide eyed, I looked around to survey your environment
Your home your neighbourhood those with whom you were bonded
I sought a safe corner in it for myself
I just wanted to hold your hand for support when I was falling
I wanted to lay down the burden of the cross I'd been carrying on my shoulders for years
For just one moment.
I wanted to ask forgiveness of a God that doesn't exist
For all the sins I committed in my life
Going down on my knees.

I wanted to experience
The Bible
Painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of a chapel.
I wanted to find out the woman who was
His inspiration behind it all.
Will you help me?

The Day She was Gone

The day she was gone,
I painted my face black.
I slapped the savage schizophrenic wind hard in its face.
I picked up small pieces of my life
And stood naked in front of a cracked mirror.
I allowed me to wreak vengeance upon myself.
I stared condescendingly at the Sun and said, 'You screwball!'
I showered choice curses upon all artists who paint dreams;
I walked from the East towards the West;
I picked stones I found on the way and hurled them at myself.
How boisterously flows this water in its fit of laughter
Through mountains and gorges.
What ocean is it seeking to meet?
Or will it seep
Into the soil at sea-level?
Did even I belong to myself
On the day she was gone?
I could not even embrace her dead body
And cry my heart out.
The day she was gone,
I painted my face black.

from

Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee (2006)

(Holding Your Finger, I Walk On)

Dedication

Babasaheb—
Forgive me!
You detested idolatry.
You didn't allow your followers to hero worship you.
I've committed this crime after you were gone.
I couldn't do without writing
The poetry of your achievement.
Babasaheb, I bow my head before you.
I'm ready to suffer for a lifetime
Any punishment you award me.
In archaic poetry, one has come across many
Who turned cursed humans back into their original form.
Babasaheb,
By suffering the punishment given by you
My life shall become pristine again.

The World of Namdeo

Henning Stegmüller

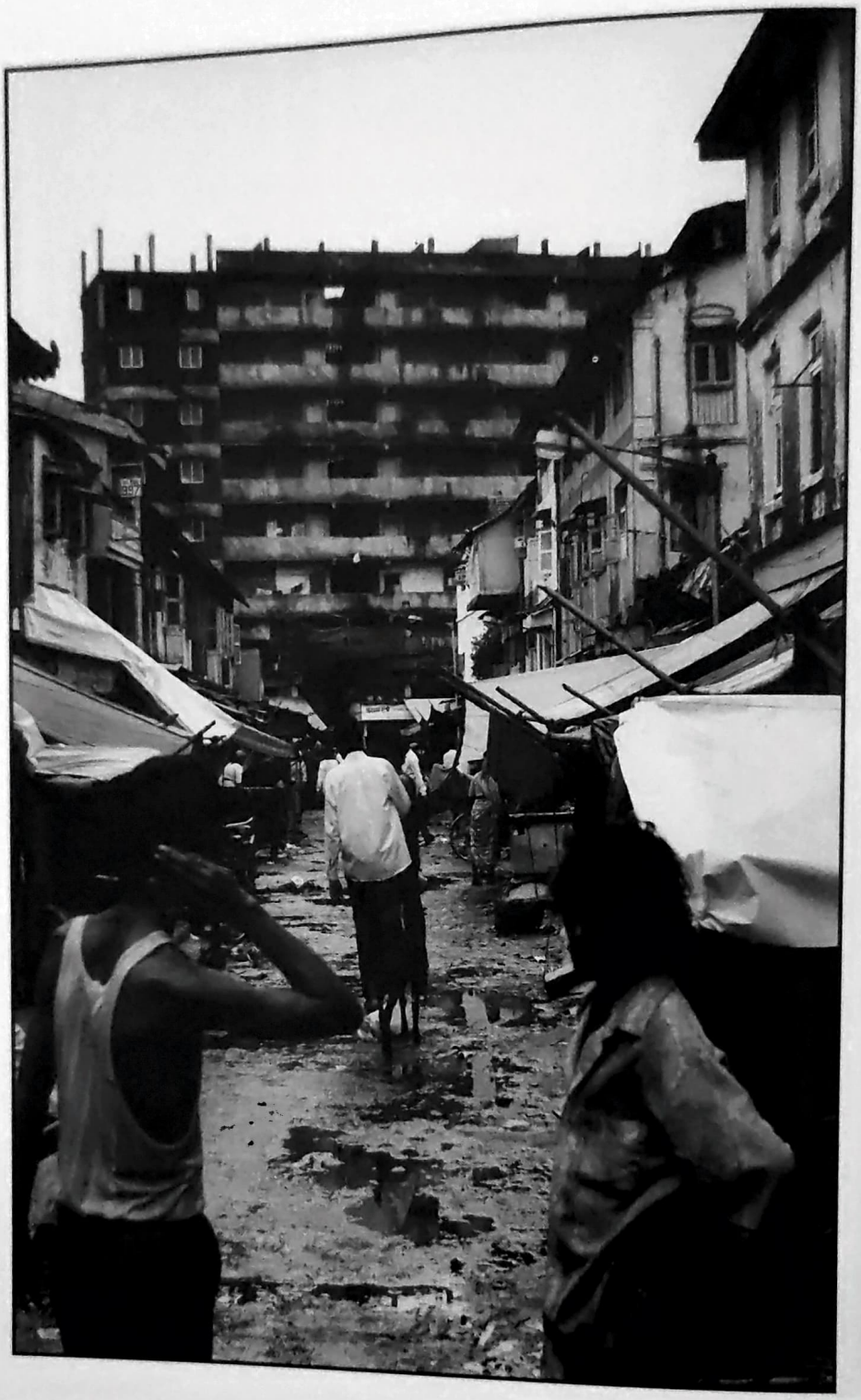
The World of Namdeo

Henning Stegmüller

Kamatipura

Kamatipura

Kamatipura



Kamatipura

Haji Ali

Bachubhai-Ni-Wadi, Central Mumbai

Central Mumbai

Byculla

Byculla Market

Malika, Ashutosh and Namdeo Dhasal

Namdeo Dhasal visiting his village Pur-Kanersar after being conferred the golden jubilee Sahitya Akademi award in 2004

Namdeo Dhasal with Nawab, a kebab seller at Golpitha, and Dilip Chitre

Namdeo's Mumbai

Dilip Chitre

Namdeo once described to me his first step into Mumbai. His father, Lakshman Dhasal, worked as a porter in a Muslim butcher's beef shop in central Mumbai. He lived in a tenement known as Dhor Chawl on the fringes of the red light district. He moved to Mumbai because his little piece of land in the hamlet called Pur in the Pune district could not feed his family and earned him no money. When Namdeo was about five or six, his mother Salubai and he arrived in Mumbai to join his father.

"What year was it, Namdeo?" I asked him.

He was not sure. But there was a clue. Namdeo vividly remembered the huge billboard on Capitol Cinema in front of the Victoria Terminus railway station advertising the classic Hindi film *Mother India*. Little Namdeo stared wide-eyed at the famous actress Nargis pulling a plough in the place of a bullock.

In the early 1950s, Mumbai still had horse-drawn cabs known locally as the Victoria after the first British empress to rule India. Namdeo and his mother Salubai, still awed by the gigantic city, rode home to Dhor Chawl with their belongings. Dhor Chawl is located near Golpitha, called *gol* because it is a round structure, and *pitha* is a country liquor shop.

Dhor Chawl consists of two parallel rows of tenements with an alley-like open space between them, enclosed by a gate-like structure. It has remained unchanged all these years; and that means through the last half of the twentieth century, and the first six years of the twenty-first century.

The rows of tenement rooms in Dhor Chawl are such that even horse stables and cowsheds may look luxurious in comparison. The rooms are unventilated and lit only by daylight that may come in from the only door. At night they would be plunged in the dark or lit by kerosene lanterns, or by cooking stoves. Electricity has

appeared only recently, and that too only in rooms where people can afford to pay for it.

Mumbai is a city of many odours and many noises. Dhor Chawl has a distinctive stench. Its leaky drainage gives a stink that blends the smells of human urine and faeces, stale food and garbage, sweat, smoke and many other subtler aromas. Its poor inhabitants try to keep it as hygienic and orderly looking as possible.

But Dhor Chawl is a neglected inner city slum. The municipal corporation of the city and the state government of Maharashtra just do not wish to have anything to do with it. Very soon, if they have it their own way, one swift act of capitalistic ethnic cleansing will flush out the lumpenproletariat from the inner city where real estate commands the highest among global market prices. This has already started happening in the areas of the city dominated by textile mills where its proletarian population have lived since the nineteenth century, when the industrial revolution made Mumbai its landing point in the subcontinent.

Peeping into a typical Dhor Chawl room one gets the impression that it resembles a barrack about four meters by five meters in area. On an average about ten to twelve people live in a single room; and they are not necessarily of one family.

In Namdeo's time as he recalls it, three or four couples lived in a single room with their children or elderly parents. Each family improvised its own kitchen in a corner of the same room. Smoke, fuel fumes and the smells of cooking food must have thickened the air inside most of the time.

One can easily imagine the noise inside the room. Other than people talking, there would be those with violent bouts of coughing, whether asthmatic or tubercular. Tuberculosis has been central Mumbai's signature infection along with sexually transmitted diseases and malaria since the late nineteenth century.

You can visit Dhor Chawl even today. It has not changed much since India became an independent modern nation state in 1947. On the other hand, around Dhor Chawl and its dismal neighbourhood, the city of Mumbai has undergone many spectacular transformations since even before independence.

Mumbai is described as an island city. It was once spread over seven islands.

Later, these islands were bridged and brought together. Land was reclaimed from the sea. Now the islands are connected with the hinterland across creeks by bridges and highways. India's first railway lines were laid here in the mid-nineteenth century. Today they connect with the entire subcontinent. It has always been an excellent natural port. Today it connects western India with not only other Indian Ocean ports but also with the world's entire maritime trade network.

Central Mumbai, where Dhor Chawl is located, has some of the city's oldest slums and its oldest red light area – Kamatipura. Surrounded by visible wealth and ultramodern high-rise buildings – both residential and commercial – the slums of central Mumbai survive like lesions, sores, festering wounds, or malignant tumours hidden in its superficially glamorous anatomy.

In Dhor Chawl and its larger neighbourhood, one cannot miss the historical fact that like Namdeo's father, Lakshman Dhasal, the people who live here are immigrants to the big city attracted by the prospect of a life better than in rural India. They are not the oldest or the original inhabitants of the islands such as the fishing community of the kolis, or the coconut tapping bhandaris, the agriculturist aagris, or the landowning and farming paachkalshis and the pathare prabhus, the East Indian Catholics, the Anglo-Indians and so forth. Neither are they the earliest immigrants to the city such as the shipbuilding Parsis and the trading Bohra Muslims of south Gujarat, the bhatias and the khojas of Kutch. Nor are they the blue-collar and white-collar labour from the Konkan coast and the Ghats of Maharashtra, who worked in the textile industry or in the expanding bureaucracy. Industry and commerce brought immigrants to Mumbai from all over the subcontinent, and sometimes from other parts of the world as well. Mumbai's multiracial, multiethnic, plurilingual, multireligious and multicommunal population has a layered archaeology as well as a dynamic history.

Kamatipura is named after the construction workers and contractors who built the city's modern buildings since the nineteenth century and came mostly from what is Andhra Pradesh now. Kamathi or kamati denotes construction workers in Marathi but the word also refers to a community or a caste. This is typical Mumbai nomenclature. A similar word used for physical labourers in Mumbai is mathadi. The mathadis are usually Marathi-speaking porters and haulers in and around the

dockyards and the warehouses along the eastern seafront of Mumbai. They are close kin of the hamaals (I believe the origin of the word is Arabic and is used for porters) who carry luggage at railway stations in Mumbai.

Mumbai being a port, part of the staple clientele of its brothels are sailors. But Mumbai is also an industrial and commercial centre and it is considered the financial capital of India. It attracts skilled and unskilled labour, small tradesmen and artisans

The slums of Mumbai are all ghettos closely huddled in one of the most densely populated areas of the city. Muslims, Bene Israeli Jewish settlers from the Konkan coast, Anglo-Indians, East Indian and Goan Catholics, Chinese, Afghan, Arab and Iranian settlers in Mumbai live to the east of Kamatipura. Parsis and Hindu Gujaratis live to its south and west; and to its north and northeast are the textile mill workers' tenements of Mahalakshmi, Elphinstone Road, Lower Parel, Parel, Chinchpokli, Lalbaug, Kala Chowki, Sewri, Wadala and East Dadar.

With the textile industry now virtually exiled or uprooted, and with the mill owners selling their hundreds of acres to the greedy global real-estate buyers and developers, this part of Mumbai's cityscape is already changing beyond recognition. A reverse exodus of population has commenced here as well as in the upper class and caste Marathi and Gujarati areas of Girgaum and Kalbadevi. The once industrial-commercial seaport city is now one of the mega-cities of the world and a hub of global capitalism. The poor and the middle classes have no place here; they cannot occupy space that commands astronomical prices in the real estate market. There is a demographic crisis in the heart of the megalopolis.

Identity and stigma

A dalit identity is the identity of a person uprooted several times in a single lifetime. He or she is the quintessential lumpen, the constantly degraded human being, and a weak and struggling member of a community of the deprived and dispossessed, with a scarred if not cracked identity. Being treated as less than human through one's growing years, and at the most impressionable age, is not a burden easy to carry; and to shed it after years of conditioning requires superhuman strength of spirit.

In Namdeo's case, his early childhood as a mahar was spent in Pur-Kanersar in the Khed taluk of the Pune district in Maharashtra. He retains a bond with this village, though the bonding cord between his native place and his present home was severed long ago, since his father was driven to Mumbai in search of a secure livelihood. Namdeo's bonds with his native Pur-Kanersar, and the few years of his childhood and adolescence that he spent in Pune, are still strong. His short novel *Hadki Hadvala* evokes a nearly idyllic landscape and some sweet memories of a warm and tender mother–son relationship in rural Maharashtra. Namdeo's descriptive passages in the novel cannot conceal a tinge of nostalgia, a delicate ache to return to a past. But this only dramatises the impact of the novel's traumatic, shattering climax.

Uprooted from the countryside and replanted in the inner city and the rotten core of Mumbai – a city of the most extreme and dehumanising forms of exploitation – Namdeo's human roots proved not only tenacious, but also triumphant. He grew up out of a cesspool, drawing nourishment from it, metabolising its toxic waste and thriving on the immunity he acquired, to become *the* poet of the underworld, a lumpen messiah, a poor man's bodhisattva.

Since independence and the foundation of the Indian republic, Mumbai's demographic profile has undergone a profound transformation. The partition of the subcontinent brought into the city (1946–1949) increasing numbers of refugees from Sind, the Punjab and Bengal. During the 1950s and 1960s, immigrants came to the city from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka—virtually from everywhere. In the 1970s, perceiving that the Marathi-speaking population of the capital of the Marathi-speaking state was 'losing job opportunities' to 'outsiders' the Shiv Sena capitalised on the fear and insecurity of 'the Marathi man' of Mumbai. The Shiv Sena initially targeted the non-Marathi immigrant from the South as 'the outsider'. Later, it targeted the Muslim; and even later focused on 'the Bangladeshi Muslim' as the 'illegal alien parasite' on the city's economy.

Mumbai has been, ever since the British started developing it as a port to be glorified as 'the Gateway of India', a city of immigrants. It was in this city that the Industrial Revolution landed first, bringing in its wake a modern native working

class as well as the modern native capitalist. Its main attraction was its bazaars and its factories; the opportunities it offered to artisans and small traders, and to several new service industries. The downside of its demographic character was the opportunities it offered to small crime, prostitution and even beggary.

The dalit and the lumpen that became Namdeo's central preoccupation as a creative writer, a political thinker and an activist-organiser have an increasing ratio in the city's population. They would cover the majority of the inhabitants of the city's 6000 slums or about six million people. The dalit are only a part of the larger lumpenproletariat of Mumbai. Some dalits are part of the organised blue-collar and white-collar working class of the city.

In the 1950s, when Namdeo came to Mumbai as the son of a rural mahar immigrant to the big city, he was uprooted from his native village Pur-Kanersar and its ethos. Mahars in rural Maharashtra were one of the twelve balutedar communities, each assigned specific roles and functions in the public life of a village and traditionally promised a share of their produce by the landowners in return of the services rendered. Leaving his land, farming and balute, Lakshman Dhasal became a wage-earning labourer carrying animal carcasses for a Muslim butcher. The congenitally stigmatised identity of a mahar, however, continued to play its role in his life. He was an untouchable as well as a meat-eater in the eyes of caste Hindus, and mahars eat beef with relish offending devout cow-worshipping Hindus, especially brahmins. In Dhor Chawl, where Lakshman Dhasal brought his wife Salubai and son Namdeo, Hindus of subordinated castes, poor Muslims and assorted *d*alits lived as intimate neighbours. But theirs was a communal and a caste ghetto in the big city. The upper classes and the privileged castes of the city lived in their communally segregated or class-wise and status-wise distributed neighbourhoods.

Bombay/Mumbai is a two-named city. The British spelling suits its neo-Gothic landmarks and its early modern art deco architecture, its Manhattan-like downtown skyline, and the northward spread of its western seafront suburbia. The Marathi–Gujarati Mumbai is its inner city. Central Mumbai, once the home of its textile industry, is the centre of its traditional trade and commerce.

The eastern seafront of the city consists of its shipyards, docks, quays and warehouses. The city's religious minorities – except the Parsis – such as the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews live in the central and the eastern parts of the old inner city. The city's third name is the Hindustani 'Bambai' from which the name of its creolised Hindustani dialect Bambaiya derives.

Namdeo Dhasal's Mumbai is not only the inner city's most squalid quarter but the centre of its flesh trade as well. Namdeo would often describe it as the underworld or the 'number two world'. 'Number two' or *do number* has a double meaning in Bambaiya slang. It connotes the black market, unaccounted money, the contraband, the illegitimate, and the clandestine—or in short, of criminal origin and character. In Namdeo's usage, the word acquires further shades and deeper connotations: it means *second-class* human beings, a *second-hand* world, a subordinate society, an inferior zone and so forth.

Namdeo was born with a mahar identity and even as a child he was aware of the stigma it carried. He found out that he was an *untouchable* in the tiny village community of Pur-Kanersar. A small river running through this place acts as its caste boundary. The land traditionally allotted to the mahar balutedars is known as mahar *watan* or *hadki hadwala*. The other side of the river is land owned by a brahmin family of which a former chief justice of India, Y.V. Chandrachud, is a scion.

Caste Hindu villagers have the exclusive right to fetch upstream water while the untouchables can only have an access to the downstream. There is a huge well, big enough for swimming, near the river that is the caste monopoly of the *touchables*. Its use is forbidden to the untouchables.

One of Namdeo's childhood memories is about swimming in this well when the man guarding it was out of sight. While Namdeo and his other untouchable friends were enjoying playing in the water of this well, their squeals of delight and screams of laughter brought the guard to the well. Seized by murderous fury at the idea of the well being polluted by untouchables, the man started throwing stones at the children in the well, and shouting for others to help him in his holy war. The children could not easily climb out of the well and run away to safety. They had a hard time avoiding being hit by the fusillade of stones aimed at them. Namdeo somehow escaped unhurt.

Imagery and metaphor connected with *water* and *soil* are remarkable for their frequency in Namdeo's poems from the earliest to the most recent. They are crucial components of his construction of his dalit identity. Early in his childhood, Namdeo was made to understand what it is to be dalit. *To be dalit is to be a human being denied free access to water and to be made aware that dalits are a product of a different soil, an infertile patch of land that others do not wish to till.* These were fundamental experiences of *alienation* that were to inform all his future work as a poet, a thinker and a fighter for rights.

To be denied full human status by other human beings, to be isolated, to be excluded, to be excommunicated, to be ostracised, to be segregated, to be quarantined, to be branded, to be stigmatised, to be separated from humankind and all definitions of humanity – this is what dalit means in Hindu society. The dalit are downgraded people forced to lead a degraded life.

Growing up in Mumbai exposed Namdeo to other human beings whom the term dalit could encompass. They were not necessarily shudra among the Hindu. Some of them were Muslim, some were Christian and some were neo-Buddhist – after Ambedkar's call for mass conversion of all Hindu dalits to a faith founded on human equality. Their *class* homogeneity could be seen where they lived and how they lived.

The slums of Mumbai are the refuge of people who cannot own homes or even be legitimate tenants. The land on which their temporary homes stand belongs to either the city or the state. It is *public* land. Namdeo perceived them as one people but also saw that neither Marx and Engels method of class analysis nor the brahminical Hindu categories of varna and jati could accommodate them all on an equal footing. On a this-worldly level, their lives had much in common. But their religious, regional and linguistic backgrounds divided them. Also, most of them, like his father, were poor immigrants to the big city mostly from the rural interiors.

In a way, they were the bottom residues of a layered and hierarchic society. All those above them treated them as scum. They were both the lumpenproletariat and the *dalit*, in a sense; but to see them as such Namdeo had to widen the scope of either term. Namdeo also saw them as alienated in the extreme from the elite. He saw

shades of slavery in their condition. He saw that they were not part of the human society above them that ruled them. They were its beasts of burden. Seen as objects of contempt or pity but never empathised with as fellow humans, never treated with genuine compassion.

Namdeo's Mumbai is foregrounded by where he came from and what he came from. For very few of Bombayites or *Mumbaikars* are anything but immigrants or sons and daughters of immigrants. All of them bring to the big city something of their native soil: a faded but deeply etched worldview; an early conditioning; a first language and its culture; the memory of their family and their community; a home and a habitat left behind but never abandoned.

First encounter

It was in 1966, I think, that I first met Namdeo Dhasal. I used to live then at Sion, a suburb of Mumbai, in a temporarily leased room on the terrace of a three-storied building comprising six flats, with my wife Viju and my five-year old son, Ashay.

I was twenty-seven and Namdeo was about eighteen. I had chucked my lucrative job in a multinational company to live as a freelance writer and artist. Namdeo was a taxi driver based in Kamatipura. The only thing we had in common was that we wrote poetry in Marathi and were connected with anti-establishment 'underground' publications—little magazines, broadsides and pamphlets published by individuals and groups with scant resources but a strong desire to bring about a change in society, culture and politics through literature and the arts.

Viju has a vivid memory of Namdeo's first knock at our door when I was out downtown looking for freelance assignments. It was literally a knocking, as we had no doorbell. The knocks were loud and impatient. When Viju opened the door, she saw a fierce-looking youth, his hair dishevelled, dressed in a brash shirt of gaudily printed cotton, glaring at her. She was alarmed. "Is this where Dilip Chitre lives?" he asked. "Yes. But he's not at home. Do you have any message for him?" "Tell him Namdeo Dhasal called," the young man growled almost insolently, "I'll call again."

And call he did; the same evening.

"So this is Namdeo Dhasal," I thought as I looked at the young ruffian who

stood in front of me. He was as Viju had described him to me. She felt he was dangerous, someone I should keep away from. He carried with him the ambience of an unfamiliar world, a strata of society that was unknown to us but threatened our idea of life in some way.

"I am a poet," Namdeo said, "and a taxi-driver. I know you as a poet. I thought you would be interested in my poetry. I like your poems."

Ten years before Namdeo and I first met, and when I was the same age as him, I became the co-founder of the first Marathi irregular periodical devoted exclusively to poetry – *Shabda*. My senior colleagues in this venture were Arun Kolatkar, Ramesh Samartha and Bandu Waze. We closed down *Shabda* in 1960, but it had acquired legendary status since. It heralded a counter-establishmentarian literary movement that snowballed. Namdeo Dhasal later launched *Vidroha* (Revolt), a little magazine of protest writing.

In the mid-1950s, when we started *Shabda,* we were looking for like-minded creative writers who were opposed to the Marathi literary establishment in one way or another. We took the newly founded republic of India seriously and felt we had a long stake in its future. We also saw literature as an instrument of cultural change and as an expression of all deeper concerns such as the quality of life and the realisation of liberty, the striving for equality and the achievement of excellence.

By the mid-1960s, when Namdeo's generation was emerging, Mumbai reflected the exuberance and the turmoil of the creative scene in India. The first generation of literate dalits born in independent India and moulded by the charisma of Ambedkar was about to take on the Marathi literary establishment in an unprecedented confrontation.

Namdeo, as I then learnt, was an ardent follower of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia. He was an authentic activist and his origins made him very special. He was very keen on showing me where he came from, and he was sure this would change my views. This was six years before he co-founded Dalit Panther with J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle and Raja Dhale; and before *Golpitha* – his first collection of poems – burst like a bombshell in the placid precincts of Marathi poetry. Since then I have been very close to the volcanic upheavals in Namdeo's life

and his literary career; perhaps too close to be comfortable and objective, but never too far to miss a vital insight into his genius and his profound humanity.

The years 1966 to 1971 were a period of stress and strife for me, but they were also the most fertile period in my life as a poet, writer and artist. Namdeo's appearances in and disappearances from my life were sudden, brief and meteoric.

In this period, I tried to freelance and survive. But when this did not work out, I took on jobs and changed them. I had no fixed or permanent accommodation in Mumbai and I was determined not to live in my parents' joint-family set up. Having lived as a nuclear family in Ethiopia with my wife and son in the early 1960s, and having decided to keep my independence to nurture what I thought was my creativity, I moved from one suburb to another in Mumbai. I changed jobs: working for a cultural organisation for a couple of years, then becoming an advertising copywriter, and then moving into one of the country's largest newspaper groups. I also developed some new skills. I learnt the technique and craft of filmmaking, and I also learnt typography, visual and graphic design, and honed my skills in oil painting. I earned my bread from diverse sources using my inborn gift and hard-earned skills. But I spurned a secure life that demanded the sacrifice of my personal creative projects. It was a tightrope walk. I was constantly incurring debts and heroically paying them off all the time.

Meanwhile, my son Ashay was old enough to go to school. We enrolled him in an English-medium school in Byculla. We did not want him to change schools too often, as I myself had done. So, from Sion we moved to the very upper class neighbourhood of Breach Candy, and from there to the working class neighbourhood of Chinchpokli almost in quick succession. But we remained within easy commuting distance of Byculla.

Visiting Kamatipura

In 1971, when I was creative executive in the art department of the Indian Express Group of newspapers at Express Towers, Nariman Point, Namdeo came back into my life with a vengeance. I was working on a promotional campaign for the advertising department of the *Indian Express* that I had to deliver before a rapidly

approaching deadline. I had instructed my stenographer and the department's 'peon' not to let anyone into my cabin. They held Namdeo – who wanted to see me – successfully at bay for a couple of hours. With uncharacteristic patience, Namdeo waited outside.

It was only when I stepped out for some reason that I saw Namdeo. I strictly discouraged friends from visiting me in my office during office hours and I was disturbed to find Namdeo sitting in the only chair meant for visitors. He noticed my frown. But I was quick to apologise to him.

"Why don't you see me at home in the evening?" I suggested. He asked me my address. I gave him my Chinchpokli address. The area was part of his beat. Textile mill workers and small traders lived there. Namdeo said he would see me later in the evening and he left without complaining or protesting.

I came back home, showered and was just beginning to unwind when Namdeo rang my doorbell. He did not want to step in and declined the cup of tea offered by Viju. He said he would prefer to take me out for a talk. Viju was alarmed. Namdeo still looked uncouth and dangerous to her. She also knew that I was tired after a hard day's work in the office and cherished my privacy in the evenings. But Namdeo was firm and persuasive. "I'll bring him back soon, Vahini (sister-in-law)," he promised her with a charming smile, and out we went.

Namdeo then informed me that one of my colleagues in the Indian Express Group – Narayan Athavale who worked for our Marathi newspaper *Loksatta* – was publishing his first collection of poems, *Golpitha*. He also told me that my friend and colleague Vijay Tendulkar was writing a foreword to the book.

I was intrigued. Narayan Athavale was a brahmin and a rightwing Hindu. I could not imagine a less unlikely publisher for Namdeo's poems; and Vijay Tendulkar writing a foreword to a collection of Namdeo's poems? Nothing I could think would be more surreal and bizarre than the conjunction of Dhasal, Athavale and Tendulkar. I expressed my surprise to Namdeo.

"Will you come with me? I'll show you what Athavale and Tendulkar find interesting about my poetry. It is Golpitha – the centre of my poetry and the world in which I grew up."

I grew up in Mumbai since my adolescence. I knew where Golpitha was and vaguely what it was notorious for. In my schooldays, when we took a tram at Dadar Tram Terminus to go to south Mumbai, the longest and slowest but also the cheapest tram route went past the red light neighbourhoods of central Mumbai. Middle class kids like me had a fearful fascination for those streets lined with 'cages' in which female prostitutes lived, and the windows painted parrot-green or betel-juice red in which we glimpsed scantily dressed whores displaying their ample tits or naked thighs. It made us think of venereal diseases and made us confused about the possible attractions of commercial sex, though in Hindi movies some of them were portrayed with romantic sympathy. I had seen brothels in Addis Ababa, where they are extensions of bars, but not in my own city Mumbai.

I was never a prude. My attitude to life has always been far from prudish. I am not a killjoy. I have had friends who regularly whored, among them some really good writers and poets. But I keep financial transactions outside the realm of human sexual relationships. I find money at the root of many spoilt relationships. Prostitution is a mockery of the value I place in natural sexual pleasure that lies in reciprocation and uninhibited communication in an ambience of warmth, tenderness and mutual curiosity.

I can relate to a sex worker as a human being. I may even offer money to a prostitute as help. But I would not ask for sex in return of favours of other kind or in consideration of some rendered service. I hate to be served. Giving freely and taking freely are almost my ideals in life.

As Namdeo took me around Kamatipura, through its lanes and by lanes, it was like looking at life in a poor people's hospital, ward after ward, and becoming aware of life as it is lived in a terminal ward. There were dead ends everywhere and no openings in sight. As we went along, Namdeo talked about prostitutes and pimps, hijras, loan sharks, corrupt cops, drug addicts, petty criminals, street urchins, sexually transmitted diseases, physicians and general practitioners, gangsters, supari killers, singers and mujra dancers, folk balladeers, tamasha artistes, coolies, immigrant labourers, food vendors, paan shopwallahs—all sorts of people who spiced these streets and their life.

"This is *do number ki duniya,*" he said. "This is the bottom of the world. This is where my poems come from. I've taken Vijay Tendulkar around this place. I've shown this to Narayan Athavale. I'm showing it to you. I'll show it to anyone that wants to know what life is like here. I grew up here. I have a bond with these people. They are my people – these lumpen; I am one of them. My poetry is about life here."

Namdeo on Namdeo

I did not have to consciously turn to poetry. Ever since I learnt to speak my mother tongue as a child, I started playing with words.

My native village is near Pune. Twin villages really, side by side or joined. A river divides the villages. My village is Pur and the one next to it is Kanersar. My mother came from Kanersar. My father's village is Pur. Even today, the combined population of the two villages does not exceed seven thousand.

These two villages are like most of our other villages. They are dominated by the caste system and its many jati or community segregations. Under the direct or indirect influence of religious traditions, our people naturally observed the dos and the don'ts of untouchability.

My kinsfolk took enthusiastic part in the many fairs, festivals, and traditional rites and rituals in the rural region. My paternal and maternal uncles, and my maternal grandfather jointly formed a tamasha troupe. This was in the generation before the time of the renowned folk theatre songwriter Patthe Bapurao.

The tamasha theatre season opens after the Full Moon in the month of Poush (December–January). I used to closely watch the rehearsals performed by my maternal uncle Dagadu Sonavane's troupe. The robust ribaldry of the lavani songs of the tamasha would indirectly rouse the womenfolk in our community dwellings.

(This text has been reconstructed by Dilip Chitre from an interview with Namdeo Dhasal by Marathi poets Satish Kalsekar and Pradnya Lokhande published in the Marathi literary journal *Anushtubh*, July–August 1997. The excerpted parts have been edited and rearranged as first person statements made by Dhasal.)

My mother and my maternal aunt were excellent singers. They would pick the choicest melodies from the tamasha singers and render them exactly as the original.

My mother used to sing in all the genres we associate with women's folk singing tradition: ovis, bhajans and all those kinds of lyrics. In my novel *Hadki Hadvala* I have used one of the best among those songs. In nightly community gatherings, our people enjoyed much singing and dancing, and this entire rich atmosphere has nurtured my sensibility.

My father's father or my grandfather – Raoji Buva Dhasal – was an excellent shehnai player and his name figured in the Maharaja of Indore's respected musicians list. My father's brother Narayanbuva was a great bhajan and kirtan singer, a virtuoso harmonium player, and he was an expert player of tabla and mridang. He had immersed himself fully in the Varkari pilgrims' musical tradition and skills. So much so, that he was allowed direct access to the inner sanctum of their deity's temple. Another uncle of mine, Manohar Dhasal was an outstanding dholki player.

In our families there were two traditions—the Natha Sect and the Varkari Sampradaya. This meant that we had regular readings of texts from the *Shivalilamrut* to the *Jnaneshvari*, especially in the sacred month of Shravan; and I recall joining as a child the dindi processions for anything connected with Jnaneshvar and Tukaram. I also remember having attended the kirtans of Gadge Baba in my childhood.

In the custom-bound life cycle of a village in those days there was much fun for a child: for example in the Shimga festivities (following Holi) we put on fancy masks and dresses assuming fictitious roles, we made Virs dance, and we went collecting donations from door to door. I used to wear a sari and dress up as a woman, and perform a dance that was a hit with everybody. People went crazy over my dance.

After 1957, there was a wave for conversion to Buddhism all over Pune district. The mahars in one taluka after another stopped doing their caste-assigned customary duties in a village. In the wake of the mass movement started by Ambedkar, our people everywhere formed musical troupes to gather and address

audiences and sing inspiring songs to them. I heard many such concerts.

One day, influenced by those concerts, I felt like writing a song myself. Thus, when I was in the third grade at school, I wrote a song.

I started attending school in the Baney Compound in Mumbai from the fifth grade. I met in this school a teacher who gave me my first real taste of literature and nurtured it. His name was Narayan Shankar Kokate. He was indeed a master of old Marathi literature and he prepared me well. From the fifth grade I started writing poetry and by the time I was in the seventh grade, I had memorised Marathi prosody and all its intricacies to a level of mastery. I could quote examples of metres, stanza structures, rhyme schemes and figures of speech at will from memory. Though from my earliest childhood listening to poetry had kept me company, this teacher directed my reading of poetry and helped me to develop a taste for it. He brought me on the right track, as it were. A little later, I encountered the reference library of the Janata Kendra and at that formative age, it was as though I found myself in the middle of a vast ocean.

The poems I wrote at that time were lyrical in that narrow and inauthentic form handed down to us by a false tradition. In those days, my favourite poets were Bha Ra Tambe and Balakavi. Savarkar was then no less than a hero to all of us.

Our teacher Kokate was by caste a vishya-vani. Though well read in Marathi literature, he was a traditionalist to the core. Under such influences, whatever can lead a poet takes only a traditional path. Until I came across the highbrow literary magazine *Satyakatha* and the avant garde little magazines in Marathi, I wrote heaps and heaps of Romantic nature poems and love poems.

Concepts such as a revolt against the system began to emerge around 1960. Those writers who were producing literature under the banner of realism were themselves probably unaware that their writing was realistic. Even those who came out of a communist or a socialist background did not have what could be called a real vision. They just wrote; and when they wrote about what is found in real life – for example, the short story writer and novelist Bhau Padhye – their purpose was not any ideological exercise. They started writing and intuitively moved on to the track where real life was – through writing.

Finding myself

To talk about myself, I arrived at my path because of an incident concerning a girl in my real life. It was my experience of a love relationship frustrated by communalism and casteism. At that time, I was a leading activist of the Praja Samajwadi Party. To my disenchantment, I discovered then that even the so-called liberated and progressive people in establishment politics are privately communal and casteist.

Let down by my colleagues' and comrades' attitude, I became furious at the sham I found. I threw myself into a life that made me a taxi driver for a living and a young man who rushed into all sorts of experiences ranging from visits to opium and hashish smokers' dens to the houses of prostitutes.

I boozed. I visited brothels. I went to mujra dancing women's establishments and to houses of ordinary prostitutes. It was a revelation of a tremendous form of life. *It was life!* Then I threw all rule-books out. No longer the rules of prosody for me. My poetry was as free as I was. I wrote what I felt like writing and how I felt like writing. I had found my weapons and I sharpened them. Nothing was going to stop me now. I went on writing, unshackled and liberated.

Once you develop a taste for knowledge, you begin to grow fast. If you do not have a vision, you become a problem unto yourself. I never became a problem to myself. I became a socialist; but as soon as I saw the hollowness of it, I turned to communism. However, whatever I did, my foundation was Ambedkar's vision.

Knowledge is a peculiar thing. Once it enters your brain, it does not stop working. Once I took up a writer to read, I would read everything written by that writer. For example, if I happened to come across Khandekar then I would read all the works of Khandekar I could lay my hands on. I read anything and everything I could find to read. I just went on reading.

Speaking of my own poetry, there was no such thing in my case as a fixed time for writing. When I was a taxi driver, I went to a particular eatery to have food. I would sit there and write whatever I had on my mind.

I will share with you the secret of my success. I never compared myself with anyone else. I never consulted anyone else on whether what I was writing was right

or wrong. I wrote as I felt all the way. The important thing was to find one's own ways of writing. The only rule I followed was not to miss in my writing any of the subtleties and nuances of the life I lived. For what makes one speak or write are the themes that create an excruciating turmoil inside you, heighten your sensitivity and leave you tenderly troubled. This is the sort of inner disturbance from which my poems come.

Both my individual and my collective life have been through such tremendous upheavals that if my personal life did not have poetry to fall back on I would not have reached thus far. I would have become a top gangster, the owner of a brothel, or a smuggler.

I am here now only because my poetry has brought me up to this point in my life. The biggest influence on me has been that of major European poets. It was the Marathi little magazines that awakened me and made me aware. When I regarded myself a victim of the caste system, it was the little magazines where I found a refuge that I could have faith in.

I have led a head-on kind of life. I have always done what I felt I must do. I have not run away. Therefore, when I get involved in the life of the child of a prostitute, I have a friendly relationship with her. I have friendly relations with a pimp, too. I am so neutral and nonjudgmental. A deep belief that humanity is a person's greatest source of strength is ingrained in me. That is where I come from. This is why I was able to capture in my work such nice nuances of life. *Golpitha* is only *an observation*.

Dalit Panther and my politics

I accepted a political commitment when I founded Dalit Panther. At that time, I had already severed my relationship with the Samajwadi Party and its ideology. By then, I had realised what the limitations of international socialism were and where they would draw an ideological line in the global context. Nevertheless, among Indian socialists I felt an almost congenital affinity for Dr Ram Manohar Lohia and Acharya Narendra Dev. Even today, I remain under the influence of their writing.

I had to prepare ideological ground for my political commitment to Dalit Panther. We would have nothing to do with the so-called progressive and left

parties as long as *the problem of untouchability was not their topmost political priority.* Around 1968–69, I gradually came to believe that untouchability would be our prime target.

I realised that the Samajwadi Party worked within certain class limits. In the cities they would organise the slum-dwellers. In the rural areas, they would organise landless labourers and small farmers. The communists too would organise farmers. None of these were representative organisations. I came to know of their history and their limitations.

From the 1962 Indo-Pakistan War until about 1970, I did a lot of basic political reading. I read the selected writings of Lenin, Mao and Marx, and so on. These readings helped me to find my own ideological ground and vision to inform my political activity. When I read the book *Dialectical Materialism* I felt as though the nature of the world had suddenly been revealed to me. I also read Lenin's the *State and Revolution.* By and by, I began to realise the limitations of all the established political parties.

One felt the necessity of having a political party of one's own in order to achieve one's goal. The achievement of the goal depended on the collapse of the capitalist-democratic state and this could be only brought about by a broad-based political organisation that could bring within its fold all the exploited, all branches of the untouchable. My vision could see that far and out of that vision came the manifesto of Dalit Panther.

From the very outset, I was clear in my mind that our organisation – Dalit Panther – was not Marxist. I had in mind another kind of experiment even then. In all the literary movements of that period, and in all political parties of that time as well, certain kinds of polarisations were taking place. A part of it was visibly or invisibly acting through me when I founded Dalit Panther to create a comprehensive base and it was a huge success from the start. It brought together people of different castes, communities and religious faith. Most of the untouchable communities were there: charmakar, bhangi, matang and all.

Its early success made all the left parties take notice of Dalit Panther. We had our sympathisers among both the communists and the socialists.

In 1975, all of a sudden, Raja Dhale accused me of being Marxist and contended that Marxism and Ambedkarism were mutually incompatible. My own party expelled me as I found myself in a minority. Marx and Ambedkar do contradict one another and this debate has been going on since 1938. I was only its latest victim.

After 1960, when dalit literature turned to serious thought about itself, the Ambedkarite movement itself contained several tendencies that tried to jeopardise serious creative writing. Some of these saboteurs of serious creative writing were Republican Party workers, some were activists on the cultural front, some belonged to the Bouddha Mahasabha and some to the Bouddha Sahityasabha.

In the context of international politics, my sympathies lay with the Communist Party of India. I never had any sympathy with a government that tried to preserve democratic capitalism. Nevertheless, a capitalist democratic government becomes a part of people's lives. It exerts a certain powerful influence or is internalised directly or indirectly in one's life. I understood all this at an ideological level.

My own tragedy was that I was branded a communist and was expelled by my own party and found myself in a minority. I was never a card-bearing member of the Communist Party of India.

There is a law of politics that when there is a conflict between survival and revival, it is important that you go on the defensive and preserve yourself. The support I gave later to Indira Gandhi was according to the ideal of the Communist Party of India and because I rationally understood the situation.

I wanted revolution. I wanted to overturn the government. However, it was the utopian idea of a romantic person. The real problem was that rousing only a specific section of society is no way to bring about a complete revolution. The greatest support of the revolution comes from the human being whom the process of exploitation crushes.

When Dalit Panther supported the national Emergency, we signed a written agreement with Indira Gandhi's Congress party. The then president of the Congress, Dev Kant Barua, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, information minister Vidya Charan Shukla and R.K. Dhawan were all present on the occasion.

When I met Indira Gandhi our meeting lasted for an hour and a half. Most of

the time, I talked. I reviewed the political situation and frankly discussed with her, what she had done and what we felt she should do or have done. I explained to her how Dalit Panther operated within the framework of democracy. She was impressed.

There was some history to be set right. All the morchas of Dalit Panther – its public protest marches and demonstrations – were led by me and I was always in front when these took a violent turn when they were intercepted. I was involved in all the fisticuffs and the street fights that took place then. In reality, I had nothing to do with naxalite insurgents. However, government files recorded that Namdeo Dhasal was a naxalite.

In the event, Mrs Gandhi ordered all the pending cases and charges against me and the Dalit Panther to be withdrawn, including those concerning the caste riots in Worli in Mumbai. Mrs Gandhi asked me repeatedly if she could do anything more for Dalit Panther or me. However, I felt awkward and embarrassed – almost guilty – to ask. I did no bargaining with her. All I wanted was a revolution.

My 'political' poetry

I do not differentiate between political poetry and non-political poetry. I have been criticised by many. Whenever I find the time, I read what my critics write. However, it does not affect me. I understand from the criticism that the literary establishment, such as it is, finds unacceptable any poetry that deals with the political and social processes of our life. Our times are such that we have to move on, leaving the establishment in its own fix.

Poems in *Moorkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavile (The Stupid Old Man Moved Mountains)* have been criticised and the critics say that Namdeo Dhasal is a political-propagandist poet. I do not think so. That collection has poems on one's beloved, one's wife, one's aunt and one's mother. They capture the spirit of a period and I am happy I could write poems of this kind as well.

The poem on Indira Gandhi in the collection *Priyadarshini* is an ode. Every word in that poem bears the weight of responsibility. I am a committed person and I am constantly involved in political activity. However, during these activities, I

write poems too. On the other hand, if I read a book like *Dialectic Materialism* I enjoy it as though it were a poem. Others become serious when they read such a book. They are stunned. I am inspired to write a poem.

The poems in *Moorkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavile* were written during a period when the organisation I founded was in full form and I was reading a lot of Marxist literature. The poems in that collection reflect my life in that period. They may be called political or non-political. I have no such differences in mind. At any given moment of my life, whatever springs up from my mind and takes a spontaneous verbal form becomes a poem for me. My so-called political poems belong to that rich period of my life when Dalit Panther was on the right track. That is where the force in those poems comes from.

When that book came out, our so-called aesthetes were scandalised. I have never paid any heed to the reaction of that class of critics. First, genuine literary critics and interpreters do not exist in Marathi. They never did even in the past. Those who were known as literary critics were on the side of our enemies. Literary criticism and interpretation in Marathi are lacking in rich awareness.

One does not boast about one's poetry after having written it. One does not regard the writing of poetry as anything other than an indivisible part of one's daily life—such as breaking bread. It is just as natural as eating. Therefore, one does not need to keep scratching in search of themes and reasons.

It is for these reasons that I did not take part in any shoddy literary discussion or cheap gossip. I am not a narcissist to be in such love with my own creative process. I have a mission in life and that is to oppose all forms of exploitation—economic, social, cultural. My poetry is a product of my spontaneous commitment to my mission. What I write is spontaneous, natural. I make no compromise there.

In the period we were passing through then, Indira Gandhi was a heroine to me in the international context and in the political situation in India. Then I wrote the poem *Priyadarshini*. I captured intuitively the future that I felt she represented and she met an end such as I had foreseen. It was one's vision that the poem expressed. *Priyadarshini* was written in the style of the Bible. I solved the problem of

its style by choosing that register because I regard all scriptures as poetry. *Priyadarshini*, in my view, is a powerful ode and I do not think there is any other poem to equal it written on a political figure. However, I should not praise my own work.

The fact remains that until now I remain an activist with a deep awareness of the problem of untouchability and its far-reaching consequences. I concentrate on this one point agenda. This is the main area of my work. Every day I have morchas or meetings to address, or protests to organise. I do not do anything else. This is all my life. I have not yet felt like moving away from this life or stepping aside. I feel that this work is my responsibility. I have to go on doing this as long as I have the capacity to go on. Or else I will not forgive myself. That is why I do not run away. All others have run away from this.

There have been attempts to politically uproot me, to throw me out of social movements, to marginalise me. Yet, I have held my ground. This is my field and I am not going to quit it. Moreover, having made up my mind to stick to my position, I will continue to write the way I do, as is natural to me. Call it political poetry, call it social poetry if you like, but as long as there remain contradictions and conflicts between individual and collective life that affect my feelings, my poetry will be about them.

Call it a coincidence or whatever else you will, but the twentieth century's heritage has been handed down even to Marathi literature. I do not reject that heritage. One cannot be mean. In my view, there should be no borders of nations confining us. There should be no armies. After all we belong to this world. Whatever that happens in this world is done for the sake of humanity, and while this is being done, humanity faces obstacles; and I will say that I love those obstacles too. My vision is not restricted to the ground under my feet.

I love Mao. I love Fidel Castro and his friend Che Guevara. I love Ho Chi Minh. I love Marx and I love Lenin. I love those people in their own time.

In today's age of information explosion and globalisation the Third World is being encroached upon. These themes arrest me. When I respond to them at times I become too subjective. Even when you are fighting for the collective, there remains

something close to your individual concerns, your own circle, your family and your kin – my relationship with my son, with my wife, with my father, and to all my close ones to whom I owe something. Certain things haunt you, obsess you and deeply disturb your feelings. I have a certain relationship with my native village that figures in this. They all influence my poetry, as they have become a part, however indirectly, of my life.

Some critics of my poetry say that there are empty pockets within me that I am trying to fill in with self-interpretative poems now. However, I have never postured as a poet and therefore I do not have to fill any blank areas in my self-image.

The fact of the matter is, even *Golpitha* was an attempt to interpret myself. What is poetry but autobiography, anyway? Even political poetry is autobiographical. Take the examples of Mayakovsky and Neruda. Realism was not the ground on which they stood. They stood on the ideological foundations of Marxism.

There are no ideological grounds that our literature contests. We have no ideological movements in our literature. We have no environment that would enlighten poets such as Namdeo Dhasal by giving them insights in political philosophy. Our academic institutions lack such environment and our literary movements too suffer from its lack.

A Translator's Delight and Despair

Dilip Chitre

I have been translating poetry from Marathi into English for over fifty years now because I write poetry in both the languages and negotiating between their two distinctly apart cultures has become a part of my nature. However, there are Marathis within Marathi and Englishes within English that need intralingual translation. Every language has a unique location as a region in a worldwide languagescape and within its broad regional boundaries there are finer, more precise locations that we point to as dialects and idiolects. We cannot escape translation even if we happen to think of ourselves as monolingual in a plurilingual universe. Where we speak from is our unique location in the universe of human-made speech. The rest of this universe is what we listen to, imbibe and empathise with.

Translating poetry is listening to the voice of another human, identifying it, empathising with it and making it one's own. From the very start, as a translator I am aware that though I speak in a voice uniquely my own, I allow it to be possessed and occupied by another human voice that is located elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' is a larger, deeper repository of human voices, real as well as imagined. It is a shared and sharable universe; and it is the very stem of all languages and acts of speech (and writing).

I translate poetry in order to understand and appropriate it as much as to widen my awareness of its variety and expanse; and hopefully to share it with another audience located in my other language, my target language. The journey from a source language to a target language is fraught with many hazards; not the least of them being translation police and watchdogs, often self-appointed, who would like to mediate and control the negotiations between a translator and his audience.

One can change the metaphor slightly and view them as border guards of imaginary boundaries—political, cultural, linguistic. They often assume the role of artistic or aesthetic sentries asserting a tyranny of categories and hierarchies upon the very phenomenon of expressive speech and significant literature. Once I used to be wary of them; now I am just weary of their ubiquitous presence.

Coming to Namdeo's poetry, I first came across it in the mid-1960s—a period of sea-change in the world and in Marathi literature as well. The cold war between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies was at its peak. Its victims were the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America—or the 'Third World' as it was perceived then.

Though both the superpowers that confronted each other were engaged in a nuclear arms race and manipulated the rest of the world according to their own geopolitical design, their unsuspecting victims often allied with one of them as a coloniser and the other as a liberator.

For, the cold war was also a global propaganda war using the mass media as weaponry extending the might and the reach of their war machine. It induced weaker societies and smaller nations – many of them new entrants in the international community – to arm themselves against imaginary and real enemies in their own neighbourhoods or even among themselves. Civil wars, coups, genocides and so-called revolutions afflicted the Third World with a malaise that began to surface in the mid-1960s and became chronic and endemic by the turn of the millennium.

Namdeo saw himself as a victim not only of the ongoing caste war in Hindu society in India, but also as a victim of oppressive global imperialism. He was barely in his twenties when he tried to reconcile his Ambedkarite egalitarianism with Lohiate socialism and then further on with Marxism and communism. He chose his deities and demons from a mythology and history that drove his own time and created a mythopoetic universe of his own. That universe is a part of the vision that informs his poetry till now. As a translator of his poetry, it is not my business to discuss the possible flaws and contradictions in his ideology and his changing stance as an activist. I have to focus on his vision and the passion with which his poetry conveys it.

Marathi critics, who are quick to label literary phenomena, saw Namdeo as part of what they started describing as 'Dalit Literature'. This was their clever way of keeping him out of a mainstream, the 'upstream' being exclusively accessible to caste Hindu literary culture and the 'downstream' offered as their domain to the 'unchaste' for whom dalit' is a politically correct euphemism.

I see this as a kind of reverse discrimination. After all, 'dalit literature' can also be viewed as the literary form of the old ghetto; or it could be likened to the many 'Ambedkar Nagars' or 'Siddhartha Nagars' in cities all over Maharashtra, a politically correct euphemism for segregated colonies 'reserved' for the former untouchables. This aspect of identity politics promotes the asymmetrical relationship between a supposed Hindu mainstream and perceived minorities. Poets of Namdeo's stature are literary artists first; their nationality, language, race and caste are transcended by their human achievement in voicing a new awareness of their creative identity as human beings. This is why they claim a larger audience in the fragmented human-made universe of their time.

The Hindu division between the sacred and the profane, when applied to society, divides the secular world between the pure and the polluted, the touchable and the untouchable. The stigma has not been erased; it has only assumed subtler forms. Opting for Navayana Buddhism as propounded by Ambedkar does not shake the foundation of the Hindu world divided between brahmin-centric communities and 'the others' – be they dalit, Muslim, Christian, 'pagan' tribal and so forth.

Nascent at the time of Ambedkar's death in 1956, the Republican Party of India soon splintered into factions. Converts to neo-Buddhism started imitating the religious rites of the majority that surrounded them rather than embracing the rational liberal humanism that Ambedkar professed and practised as his political credo. Their identity politics are based on imagery and not rooted in self-awareness of a broader and deeper kind. Namdeo's several *Odes to Ambedkar* underscore his separate evolution as an Ambedkarite. Some of them are too verbose, prolix and loose-ended to be successful poems. However, they are a new *genre* in Marathi poetry – they blend features of a soliloquy with those of a political sermon as well as a continuing dialogue with an absent but ever-present iconic mentor.

The Republican Party of India could have become a challenger to puritanical and conservative Hinduism only by widening its political base and support. This could be done only by forging a grand alliance of all the minorities whom orthodox Hinduism threatens to subjugate by corrupting and subverting the Constitution of the Indian Republic—of which Ambedkar was one of the chief architects. This is unlikely to happen given the public record of dalit leadership in Maharashtra after Ambedkar's demise.

Namdeo and I do not see the political situation in India the same way. We meet at a deeper level of our vision of humankind and human equality. I translate his human vision without sharing his political views, his strategies and his tactics as a political activist.

Dalit politics, as such, have been in a state of disarray since Ambedkar's death sixty years ago. In the last sixty years, electoral politics in India have been malfunctioning in a way that betrays the Constitution in both spirit and letter. Corrupted by power and a greed for absolute power, our democracy is in a shambles. Human rights have steadily eroded. Civil society is brutalised by populism and organised, armed hooliganism. Militant activism, such as that Dalit Panther was once founded on, has no place in the civil society Ambedkar dreamt of. Dalit Panther began as a vigilante group protesting and demonstrating against the discrimination and continuing oppression of dalits anywhere in India. Their confrontational tactics were such an irritant to the powers that be that in police records they were described as urban guerrillas and even as 'naxalites' attempting to overthrow the government by unconstitutional means. State power was used ruthlessly in attempts to crush them. Other dalit leaders, envying the popularity of Dalit Panther among urban dalit youth, criticised Dalit Panther and Namdeo in particular, for deviating from Ambedkar's constitutional path towards liberation.

But one also recalls Ambedkar's own acerbic remark, "It is difficult to cultivate constitutional morality in this soil." Only the gloomier part of his prophecy has been borne out by history so far. Namdeo's series of *Odes to Dr Ambedkar* express the same anguish as history unfolds after the death of the dalit icon.

I translate Namdeo's poetry because I empathise with its deeper resonances, its roots that reach the rich subterranean resources of language and culture, the source

that propels his metaphor and his startling imagery, the music of his ideas and the dance of his awareness. Alas, it is an exasperatingly tall order for a translator.

It is differences in our backgrounds that separated the world experienced by Namdeo and the world experienced by me. I was born in a Marathi-speaking chandraseniya kayastha prabhu (a privileged non-brahmin caste) family in Baroda in Gujarat. My father had a printing and a publishing business, and edited a Marathi literary periodical along with my mother. Both my parents were university graduates. Both were liberal and unorthodox. My father had Gandhian leanings but was also a great admirer of Ambedkar and was proud of the fact that Ambedkar was among the regular subscribers of his Marathi magazine.

As a child, I was looked after by Dagdu, a mahar from the coastal Konkan region of Maharashtra. Dagdu was a trusted employee of my father and was treated as a family member. Other caste Hindu children in our neighbourhood thought we were all 'degraded' as we had a mahar working for our family who had access right into our kitchen. At home and at school, I mingled with as many 'others' as with Hindus in all their caste and jati variety. I picked my languages and dialects from them; I shared food with them and visited their homes. Among my friends were Muslims, Parsis and Christians.

My own family migrated to Mumbai when I was just entering my teens. I went to a school in the suburb of Sion adjacent to Dharavi, described once as the largest slum in Asia. Dharavi was a mix of many ghettoes and during my schooldays about one half of the students came from the slums and were Marathi-speaking dalits, mostly chambhars—those working on hides and skins of animals in the tannery at Dharavi or as leather craftsmen in workshops nearby. To become a *déclassé* and a *decaste* this was the best natural route life offered to me.

My generation of Marathi writers was the first to develop the sense of cultural solidarity and literary fraternity across the traditional boundaries of community, caste, gender and language. We were voracious readers of both popular and elite literature. We were politically aware and socially awake.

Before I turned twenty-five, my own horizons were further widened after I worked as a teacher of English in high schools in Ethiopia in Eastern Africa. I learnt to cross the boundaries of race and culture and to be able to look at the human

condition beyond ethnic barriers. All this prepared me as a writer, though I had been writing poetry since I was sixteen.

While in Ethiopia, I translated into Marathi seven European and Anglo-American poets whom I considered outstanding early examples of modernity. I also wrote essays on them. These seven articles accompanied by translations of poems were published by a leading Marathi literary magazine. Among their enthusiastic readers was the younger poet, Namdeo Dhasal. This was one of the factors in our bonding a little later, when we met in person.

I met Namdeo about seven years before he published *Golpitha* and co-founded Dalit Panther. Our friendship has grown ever since and has helped me to bridge the cognitive gaps that would have come in my way as his translator. As a poet, I am reluctant to recognise my contemporaries as my equals unless they are unique and profound and possess the greatness of human spirit that raises them far above average literary talent and laboured craftsmanship.

Namdeo's genius was obvious to me from the start. Yet his universe remained largely obscure to me until, in his own company, I saw where his life itself was rooted. I was shaken and moved by what I saw; and I was dazzled by his tremendous literary feat in finding a language that could encompass the voices of the battered masses shoved under the carpet of what we regard as our civilisation. He forces our attention on either side of life, one hidden by an oppressive darkness, and the other bursting forth into liberating light.

As a translator, Namdeo's work has often brought me to the verge of despair. All poetry defies translation. It is impossible to paraphrase it unless one grasps the spirit that informs each of its dynamic details. Thereafter, the translator has to make his foolhardy leap towards a re-embodiment of the source. Human languages are so varied and contain so many unique voices that no two of them have literary equivalents. No literal translations can ever convey or even suggest the spirit of poetry. Nothing can be an adequate substitute for the empathy and the imagination that enables us to perceive poetry and to translate it into our own inner language of soulful intimacy.

I have been compelled to omit some of my favourite Namdeo poems that are

major landmarks in the evolution of modern Marathi and Indian poetry, for the simple reason that they are linguistically too complex and deeply embedded in their own ethos. Many of his references make perfect sense to me as a serious and painstaking reader of Marathi poetry. Even if I were to clutter this book with an exhaustive gloss and a profusion of footnotes, much of Namdeo's poetic universe would remain dark and translucent, precisely located and localised. However, for Anglophone readers – and even for Indian readers of English – these rich details would remain bewilderingly incomprehensible.

A translator is moved to translate from his source by his desire to share his excitement as a reader. His community is not the same as the community of the source poet that largely shares a culture and its traditions with him. There is an obvious distance between Marathi and English. Any translator knows the nature of such distance and the hazards it creates for him or her in the crossing of boundaries. However, when one poet translates another poet, the two of them can share a poetics, stylistics and an aesthetic grammar. Readers of poetry in the target language, if they are focused on the (translated) text they are given, read that text precisely for its unique differences with poetry in their mother tongue. This is the sort of readership I, as a translator, hope for.

It was the unmistakable spirit and greatness of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry that has compelled me, for over two decades, to share it with others in the Anglophone world and its globally scattered territories. I hate footnoting and glossing creative writing and keep it to a bare necessary minimum. Poetry has its own ways of being reader friendly; and of finding its own readers in unlikely places.

Photograph: Ashay Chitre

Dilip Chitre is a bilingual poet, translator, essayist, fiction-writer, playwright, screenplaywright, filmmaker and painter. His film *Godam* won the Prix Special du Jury in Nantes in 1984. In 1994, he won both the Sahitya Akademi Award (for *Ekoon Kavita–1*) and the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize (for *Says Tuka*). He lives in Pune.

Henning Stegmüller is a still photographer, cinematographer and filmmaker. Among his documentaries are *Vari: An Indian Pilgrimage* and *King Khandoba's Hunting Expedition*—both in collaboration with eminent Indologist, the late Professor Gunther Sontheimer. In 1994, he made *Bombay: Geliebte Moloch*, a one-hour film on the city that he jointly scripted and directed with Dilip Chitre. Dhasal is a key figure in the film. Stegmüller lives in Munich, Germany.

"I AM A VENEREAL SORE IN THE PRIVATE PART OF LANGUAGE"

That's **Namdeo Dhasal**, the maverick Marathi poet who hardly had any formal education. Born in 1949 in a former 'untouchable' community in Pur-Kanersar village near Pune in Maharashtra, as a teenage taxi driver he lived among pimps, prostitutes, petty criminals, drug peddlers, gangsters and illicit traders in Bombay/Mumbai's sinister and sordid underworld. In 1972, he founded Dalit Panther, the militant organisation modelled on Black Panther. The same year he published *Golpitha* that belongs to the tradition in modern urban poetry beginning with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Since then, he has published eight collections of poems from which this representative selection is drawn.

In 2004, India's national academy of letters, Sahitya Akademi, honoured Dhasal with the only Lifetime Achievement Award it gave during its golden jubilee celebrations.

Dhasal's long-time friend and bilingual poet **Dilip Chitre**, acclaimed for his translations of the seventeenth century Marathi poet-saint Tukaram, considers Namdeo Dhasal to be one of the outstanding poets of the twentieth century.

Henning Stegmüller's black and white photographs – which reveal the gastrointestinal tract of Mumbai – offer the perfect annotations to Dhasal's poetry.

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